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MRS. LORIMER

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A SKETCH IN BLACK AND WHITE

BY

LUCAS MALET

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MRS. LORIMER.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

"Speaking in parable, I am Colin Clout.
A clinging flavour penetrates my life—
My onion is imperfectness: I cleave
To nature's blunders, evanescent types
Which sages banish from Utopia."

THE Parish of Claybrooke was agitated. Not by any public event of world-wide interest. Wars and the rumours of them affected the apathetic life of this midland village very slightly. All Europe might have been given over to fire and sword, and Claybrooke, meanwhile, would have remained serenely neutral, so long as bread did not "go up," and beasts fetched a fair price at Slowby market on Thursdays. Local interests were the only real interests of its inhabitants. The year 1815, for example, was unimportant, save as being the year following the great snow, when six of Mr. Robins's sheep were buried for a matter of eight days in a drift, down against the hedge, by the towing path. Again, the

year 1854 was rendered more memorable by the fact that old Mr. Stayley of Highthorne was killed by a fall from his horse, on a Tuesday in the third week in January, just by the corner of the fox-covert on the Lowcote Road, than by the battle of Inkermann or the bombardment of Sevastopol.

Claybrooke rigidly applied what mind it possessed to its own affairs. The Christian charity or dull dislike of its inhabitants seemed alike incapable of extending beyond a radius of some eight or ten miles. Outside the sacred circle of neighbourhood nothing appeared very interesting or important. That existence should be possible in other and more distant regions seemed strange. That life should really be worth living to people who had never been to Slowby market; had never hunted with the Midlandshire hounds; had never dined seriously, and with an agreeable sense of dignity and importance, at the tables of the neighbouring county magnates; had never been to a clerical meeting at the Archdeacon's, or seen Mr. Gerald Mainwaring, in gray breeches and gaiters, representing all the majesty of the English law to apple-stealing youths, on the bench of magistrates at Slowby,—that life, I say, should be in any way important or desirable to persons unacquainted with these things and debarred from these high privileges, seemed almost incredible to the Claybrooke mind.

But if the sympathies of Claybrooke were not wide, they were certainly deep. There not being many events in this quiet neighbourhood to observe, the few events that did occur were very thoroughly

talked over and thought over. The joys of gossip were by no means unknown. The satisfaction arising from the discovery of an acquaintance's mistakes and shortcomings was a form of satisfaction freely indulged in. A delicate movement of self-complacency in face of the sins and misfortunes of friends and relations is at least as common in the quiet country as in the busy town; and the judgments of Claybrooke were not one whit more just or merciful than human judgments are usually wont to be. Yet men and women struggled to be pure and unselfish; they nursed the sick and fed the hungry; they loved and forgave; they lived in godly fear and died fortified by eternal hope, in this unimportant, little, midland parish as elsewhere in this confusing world.

At the time of which I write, a cloud had hung over Claybrooke Rectory for many long weeks. Far away, among olive grounds and orange gardens by the shores of the distant Mediterranean, a man was fighting gallantly, but hopelessly, against the great enemy Death; and a beautiful woman sat watching, in dread and strange amazement, the progress of the bitter struggle. At home, in the stately old Rectory-house, kind hearts waited and hoped against hope. The news was bad enough in the autumn; it grew worse and worse through the winter months; and in the softer days of February, when the frost had given place to mist and fog over the heavy clay lands, and the first snowdrops pushed their way up through the black garden mould, Mr. and Mrs. Mainwaring learned that Robert Lorimer was dead, and

that Elizabeth—their niece—who had left them, as a bride, not two years ago, was coming back to them a widow.

Every one, I suppose, has wasted half an hour, at some period during the course of his childhood, in dropping pebbles into a still pond or pool, and watching the graceful rings which, after the first little splash, spread themselves in ever-widening circles over the face of the water. A good-sized pebble had, so to speak, dropped into the social pool at Claybrooke Rectory on that foggy February day, in consequence of which a series of gentle undulations of surprise, interest, and pity, spread themselves over the quiet surface of the county society for some ten or fifteen miles round. Kind-hearted country squires, in after-dinner talk over their claret, pitied the handsome young creature, left alone in the world, with no husband to care for or child to cheer her. They deplored, too, the trouble that had fallen on Mr. Mainwaring; for everybody, whose opinion was worth anything, held that a more thoroughly good fellow, or a better man across country—notwithstanding his sixty and odd years—could not be found. And though it must be owned that in proportion as a man likes his niece, he will probably dislike the man she marries, it was known that certain very dear hopes depended on Elizabeth Lorimer's marriage, which Mr. Mainwaring would find it hard to relinquish.

The clergy, too, were full of solicitude concerning both the uncle and the niece, for the Rector of Claybrooke was held in high repute by the majority of

his brethren. Perhaps his reputation was greater from the social than from the professional standpoint. Mr. Mainwaring was the last representative of an old Midlandshire family, and had married, early in life, a lady whose connections held a high position among the local aristocracy. Her brother, Sir Sellinger Selford of Selford, was a man of considerable standing in the north of the county. The baronetcy, indeed, dated from those stormy and troublous times when "the King's Parliament sat at Oxford,"—a fact which the Selfords never ignored, when a chance of referring to it arose in ordinary conversation. Mr. Mainwaring, therefore, was regarded as supplying that secure link between the lay and clerical worlds which is too often missing. And when Mr. Leeper, the newly-inducted vicar of Lowcote,—who had come into the neighbourhood, hot from town work, full of views, and of a desire that the clergy should "stand shoulder to shoulder," and defy an indifferent and untoward generation of laity,—annoyed by some rather sharp observations of Mr. Mainwaring's at a ruridecanal meeting,—ventured to describe that reverend gentleman as a "fox-hunting Erastian," and to compare him to the oft-quoted Gallio, he discovered, very shortly, that he had made a terrible mistake. Even Mr. Harbage of Highthorne—a mild, fair, and rather stout person, who, in the interests of four marriageable daughters, had always appeared very anxious to conciliate Mr. Leeper—reminded him that the Bishop stayed quite as often at Claybrooke Rectory as he did at the Archdeacon's, and that it was hardly becoming in

a new-comer to criticise so respected a member of one of the oldest families in the county.

It must also be noted that a death in itself is generally interesting. Marriages demand time to develop symptoms of happiness or misery before they afford very much subject for conversation. Births are too common to create very much excitement, as a rule. But a death immediately supplies matter for meditation, which appears to be fairly agreeable to all except perhaps the very young. The details of illness, and reminiscences of friends or near relations who have suffered from the same malady—always, strangely enough, in a very aggravated form; the feelings of the survivors; the amount of the estate of the deceased—all afford edifying matter for thought and conversation. To some few minds the more spiritual and everlasting aspects of the matter may present themselves. A small minority will lose themselves in speculations concerning the great Hereafter; and in "obstinate questionings" regarding that mysterious and impenetrable curtain, which the hand of death suddenly draws between us and those who have been "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh," whose looks and habits, whose speech, whose very clothes, are among the most familiar of our daily impressions.

But undoubtedly the concrete and the finite present themselves much more readily to most people, than the abstract and the infinite. In the dull country neighbourhood around Claybrooke, people, as a rule, lived long. "Wearing out" is next to impossible in such an atmosphere; and

"rusting out"—that process so terrible in theory to young and ardent minds—is in truth a very lengthy business, compatible with much quiet usefulness, and synonymous, in the majority of cases, with living to a good old age.

Most of the neighbouring clergy, who as slim youths fresh from the universities had married years ago and settled in their pleasant parsonage houses, were now well on in middle life. But though they had grown bulky in figure, with much sitting over sermons; though some had a slight disposition to rheumatic pains when the winter cold set in; and though all observed more wrinkles and gray hairs than were altogether pleasant, as they gazed into their looking-glasses during the operation of shaving in the morning,—no one of them all had the faintest intention of leaving his children fatherless, or his worthy wife a widow, for many years to come. Therefore that so young a man as Robert Lorimer should die seemed, it must be confessed, somewhat strange and alarming. Several gentlemen had their greatcoats relined with a view to keeping out March winds, lest any chest should be more susceptible of cold than its owner had hitherto suspected. Mr. Jones, the Claybrooke curate, went so far as to appear in a new woollen comforter and pair of indiarubber overshoes,—much to the distress of a young clerical neighbour of sporting proclivities, who had volunteered to drive him over to the meeting of the Board of Guardians at Slowby; and who felt that his neat dog-cart and high-stepping cob were most painfully compromised by his companion's

personal appearance. People who know what is what do not wear comforters or goloshes in Midlandshire! In the winter you should straddle a little, with your hands under your coat tails, in front of a roaring fire, conscious that your shooting boots and gaiters defy any amount of wet and mud; and talk in robust and cheerful tones of the fine seasonable weather, however intolerable the cold or penetrating the damp may be outside. If any thoughts concerning the prevalence of disease or the shortness of human life assail you, it is wonderful how an extra glass of sherry, after luncheon, will restore the naturally hopeful tone of your mind, and enable you to feel a comfortable assurance that you "are good for many years yet."

On the whole, men's emotions are more simple and kindly than those of women. Their minds are, so to speak, like ordinary houses, with one front and one back staircase—you know they must go up by one or the other to get to the upper rooms. While women's minds may be fitly compared to those queer, old, country mansions which are full of little unnecessary flights of stairs,—you can never be sure whether you are walking on the level or not. Meantime the owner, too often, darts out upon you suddenly from some wholly unexpected doorway or landing, having arrived there you know not how. Men were simply sorry for Mrs. Lorimer; and were extremely glad when any acquaintance, whom they happened to meet, told them that they were looking remarkably well. But mixed and confused sensations, interesting to note—and wholly incompre-

hensible to the bulk of the male population,—reigned in the female breasts in and around Claybrooke.

To begin with, there was something altogether phenomenal about so young a widow. Worthy mothers of growing sons and daughters naturally regarded trouble and loss as dignified. They had a certain satisfaction in remembering that they had known Elizabeth Lorimer as a little toddling thing who could hardly speak plain; had advised Mrs. Mainwaring concerning the length of her sleeves, and the best way of soothing her when she suffered from various childish maladies. At the same time, a delicate flavour of annoyance tempered their sympathetic interest, inasmuch as this young creature appeared to them somewhat in the light of a prodigal, who at her still tender age had managed to run through the stock of experiences that last most women their whole lives. She seemed in some way to have got quite an unfair start of them; to have assumed brevet rank; to have the advantages, and to demand the consideration, generally accorded to mature life, without its accumulation of cares, its gray hairs and faded complexion, its sense of bustle and sense of weariness, its anxious thoughts regarding the professions of sons and the marriages of daughters.

Some few ladies went even further. They had a lurking feeling that there was a touch of not uncalled-for retributive justice in poor Robert Lorimer's early death. They would have been horrified if any one had taxed them with this feeling: most of us

permit ourselves a certain latitude in thought, which appears subversive of all morals and only worthy of the most abandoned character when honestly put into words. We are all at times remarkably tolerant of our own unspoken meannesses and hardness of heart. But it is only fair to admit that there certainly are few things more irritating to the members of a small society—where unmarried men are scarce and unmarried women plentiful—than the sudden discovery that some young girl, for whom the general consensus of public opinion has selected one husband, should, meanwhile, have selected quite another husband for herself. Especially is this irritating when her choice has fallen upon a swain, whose affections were reckoned perfectly disengaged; and who had been regarded, both by watchful mothers and maidens, as wholly to the good in their matrimonial calculations.

Elizabeth Mainwaring had been guilty of this serious offence against her neighbours some eighteen months before the time of which we now speak; and the silent grudge, which some persons owed her for her unexpected marriage, had hardly yet died away.

Public opinion had unanimously concluded that Elizabeth would marry a certain young Mr. Edward Dadley, who, by way of managing his aunt Miss Maria Dadley's estate for her, spent two very pleasant winters at Claybrooke. He was a fresh-faced, clean-limbed, young gentleman, possessing better qualities of the heart than of the head. He hunted three days a week, and spent nearly all the

rest of his time at the Rectory, so that it may be questioned whether Miss Maria Dadley's estate profited, very sensibly, from the watchfulness of his eye or controlling power of his hand.

Elizabeth Mainwaring developed very much outwardly during those two years. From a dark overgrown girl, silent and shy, whose colt-like length of limb and angularity of movement were a distinct trial to her aunt Mrs. Mainwaring's delicate perceptions of grace and propriety, she blossomed into an unusually handsome young woman. She was tall, but with an easy carriage, and a figure so well proportioned that her height did not strike one as unpleasing. She had a clear brown skin, and the curly mouse-coloured hair which so often go with straight well-cut features and eyes of the dark gray that, under excitement, seem to deepen into actual violet. Such women, I think, do not develop very early either spiritually or mentally. The colt-stage is a long one with them; they are often handsomer at thirty than at twenty. They are almost invariably honest, loyal, and generous, but a little dangerous. You may live with one of them for years, fancying that you know all about her; and some fine day your poor, reasonable, slow-moving, masculine mind will be greatly distracted and confused by finding that she has taken an entirely new departure;—that some dormant emotion, or early impression, has awakened within her; that she has made a discovery and proposes to reconstruct her plan of life on new principles. She is neither a fanatic nor a propagandist; she does not ask you

to change: but she does ask you to permit her to become something, quite other than that which she has been heretofore. A man suffers a good deal under these circumstances. If discoveries are about, he would prefer that other men's wives should make them, rather than his own.

But, notwithstanding Elizabeth's increasing beauty, Edward Dadley disappeared rather suddenly from the Claybrooke stage. His aunt merely said that family business demanded his return to his father's place in the north. One morning his hunters, arrayed in much clothing, went over in charge of two tight-looking grooms to Slowby station; were got—with some kicking and stamping on their part, a good deal of coaxing and some objurgations on the part of the grooms, and not a little nervousness on that of the assistant porters,—into a string of horse-boxes, and steamed away northwards. While their owner, in a first-class carriage, meditated over an excellent cigar that even the best of fathers might prove a nuisance at times; and that though obedience was undoubtedly a great virtue, it was too often a singularly disagreeable one to practise.

About two months after Edward Dadley's departure, Elizabeth Mainwaring met Robert Lorimer for the first time. He had come down from London to spend a few days with an old college friend, the rector of Melvin's Keeping—the same gentleman whose feelings were subsequently so much outraged by Mr. Jones's comforter and goloshes. Robert Lorimer saw Elizabeth several times at different houses in the neighbourhood, and fell very much

in love with the tall, handsome, young girl. He found a number of excellent reasons for staying a month instead of a few days with his old college friend. He came back to Melvin's Keeping again in June; and early in September he and Elizabeth Mainwaring were married.

Any one living within ten miles of Claybrooke is not likely to forget the amount of talk which this event gave rise to. I groan in spirit still when I recall it. But the history of the young couple's married life, alas! was as sad as it was short. About a year later Robert Lorimer fell ill. Undeniable signs of consumption showed themselves. He was ordered abroad for the winter: the disease, however, developed itself with terrible rapidity, and only too soon there could be no reasonable doubt as to the final result. Even at the time of the wedding, a keen observer in looking at Robert Lorimer might have doubted whether he would be a long-lived man. There was something a trifle too refined and delicate in the cutting of his face, a suspicious openness in the nostril, and a certain languor of manner and bearing, at times which many people thought a little affected and insolent, but which really betokened a distinct want of vitality.

Fortunately, however, for the comfort and peace of the world in general, keen observers are rare. Most people are very willing to take for granted that a man of two-and-thirty, who is an excellent cricketer, and has the reputation of having been rather a celebrated oar at college, must have, as a matter of course, many years before him. It was

simply from the social point of view that the Claybrooke world held up its hands, in a flutter of surprise, at the marriage. Robert Lorimer was only a young barrister, giving no particular promise of a great career in his profession. Mr. Mainwaring could not be much pleased, it was said, at his niece's choice, with his feeling about the landed interest. Mrs. Mainwaring—in virtue of having been a Selford of Selford—was known to have a strong appreciation of what is generally spoken of as "family." Robert Lorimer was undeniably a gentleman,—some people indeed thought he was disposed to be rather too fine a gentleman considering his position—but he had no local standing. He had some money: but Elizabeth would have plenty of money of her own in time. It was hinted that he was too fond of books and pictures and music to be wholly satisfactory. Literature and the arts, regarded from any other than a purely amateur point of view, are reckoned a little dangerous in Midlandshire. The marriage, in short, appeared very incomprehensible, and somewhat of the nature of a mistake.

It was improbable that the Mainwarings wished, at all keenly, to annex Robert Lorimer: and oh! what would not some other people have given to possess him! Mrs. Harbage, for instance, during a few short weeks, had cherished the fond illusion that her second daughter Emily, whose youth was passing all too quickly, had made some impression upon the young barrister. Poor Mrs. Harbage would naturally have been very thankful to see one of her children safely provided for. Mrs. Harbage

had not an easy life of it. She rose early, and late took rest, working in her home and in her husband's parish; devising even on her bed at night—when certain sounds beside her testified to the ponderous slumbers of her spouse—means to make a small income cover ever-increasing expenses; thinking how to clothe and educate growing boys and girls, who, because their father was a clergyman of the Church of England, and consequently a gentleman, must be as well dressed and well informed, must go to the same public schools and colleges, must be encouraged to have the same expensive tastes and the same gentleman-like indifference to the squandering of small cash, as Sir Frederic Melvin's or Squire Adnitt's sons and daughters. Mr. Harbage's income was about £600, all told, with deductions for parish expenses, and a heavy life insurance premium. Sir Frederic Melvin's might be set down at nearly twice as many thousands: but all gentlemen are equal—a blessed truth, the mother of most bad debts and many broken hearts! If Robert Lorimer had married Emily, Mrs. Harbage felt that her faith in the goodness of Providence would have been sensibly increased. Alas! in the event, she only learnt that "unto every one that hath shall be given"—a hard saying, and one which had always appeared to her in urgent need of the attention of the revisers of the New Testament.

Such, then, were briefly the facts of Elizabeth Lorimer's life up to the present time, and the effect which the news of her husband's early death had upon the mimic world of Claybrooke and its neighbourhood.

CHAPTER II.

"A land where all things always seem'd the same!"

MEANWHILE Elizabeth Lorimer, the subject of all this thought and conversation, was travelling, through the clear winter night and the bright winter day, farther and farther from the vines and olives of the South of France, and nearer and nearer to our damp and misty midlands.

The life she had lived for the last two years, with all its interests and hopes, its pleasures and its doubts, with all its unfulfilled promises and its restless wishes, lay buried for ever by the tideless Southern sea; while the hurrying train seemed to be bearing her swiftly forward towards another state of existence.

As she lay huddled up among rugs and cushions on the seat of the *coupé*, Elizabeth felt too tired to think, or to sleep, or to sorrow. She was only conscious of the muffled roar of the rushing train as it sped northwards; conscious that when they reached Paris, she must drag herself up from these comfortable cushions, which her brother-in-law, Frank Lorimer, had arranged for her, and help to claim her luggage; conscious that there would be

another space of noisy quiet in the train, followed by a weary struggle to get on board the boat, at Calais;—that London would appear as a smoky vision, and then that, at last, she would reach the final stage of her journey. About two hours later the great green pastures, divided by their high hawthorn hedges, would stretch out on either side of the railway-track; long rows of elm-trees would rise against the low gray sky; sober-looking carts would jolt along muddy by-roads; anxious, yet stolid people, laden with innumerable baskets and parcels, would struggle in and out of third-class carriages, dragging alarmed, big-cheeked, little boys and girls after them. Elizabeth seemed to see it all. The journey, with all its varying scenes stretched out before her like a great picture; and she almost fancied that when the train stopped at Slowby, and her travelling was over—some six-and-thirty hours hence—she would find herself a little brown-faced maid again, whom tall Uncle Gerald would take up tenderly in his arms and kiss; and Aunt Susan would gently reprove for her inability to sit still; and whom Mrs. Smart would alternately coax and scold, while she undressed her by the nursery fire in the evening.

When we are young it is so difficult to believe in sorrow and disaster. So much easier to think that somehow we shall wake up and find the dear old days again, with kind people who will pet us and take care of us and tell us what to do and what to leave undone. Elizabeth was young, and she was too tired, just now, to realise that in future

she would have to be her own guide and conscience-keeper. Lying there, as the train ran on mile after mile northward, it seemed to her that trouble, and painful experience, and the awful mysterious shadow of death, were being left far behind on the shores of the unquiet Mediterranean, and that at Claybrooke she would find the sweet monotony of spelling-books and pinafores once more.

But one thing disturbed this peaceful dream—the presence of her brother-in-law, Frank Lorimer. He sat in the corner of the *coupé*, enveloped in a heavy ulster, while the light of the lamp fell with irritating clearness on the top of his travelling-cap, the end of his nose, and the point of his light-brown beard. No amount of dreaming would dream away that solid English figure; and he sat there as the sign and seal of the truth of all those painful and mysterious facts which poor Elizabeth would so willingly have disbelieved in.

Frank Lorimer, sitting in the corner of the railway carriage, pondered quietly over many things. Life had dealt pleasantly enough with him so far. At one-and-thirty he found himself strong, able, and ready for much enjoyment in many different ways. He had an enormous capacity for friendship—or comradeship, as he preferred to have it called. But he was too healthy, both in mind and body, to be fully satisfied with so spiritual a form of relationship, as the existence of Mrs. Frank Lorimer and two slim curly-headed babies clearly proved. Underneath certain theories and affectations, his nature rested upon a firm basis of common-sense, which

inspired one with considerable faith in his judgment, and comfort in his presence. His elder brother's death was the first real break in his life, the first real trouble that he had experienced : but his naturally sensible mind accepted death as one of the necessary conditions of existence ; and his sorrow, therefore, was wholly unmixed with those bitter feelings of injury and—must I add—of anger, which alone make grief intolerable. Such bereavements were common to the lot of all men, therefore his individual lot was merely subject to the general law. He took comfort in the thought, and was genuinely glad to find that he could take comfort in it. He was a kind and sensible rather than a heroic soul. He quite appreciated heroes : but, for his own part, he preferred the common walks of life and its average emotions, to mountain-tops in cloud and storm, and passions "torn to tatters."

Frank Lorimer did not meditate very deeply on his own feelings under existing circumstances. He was thinking—if the truth must be told—over the leading points of an article on the present relations of France and Italy, for the weekly paper of which he was sub-editor ; of the pleasure of getting back to his own home and to those engaging babies ; and of the probable future of his handsome young sister-in-law, in whom he thought he detected a tendency towards the tempests of feeling and strange exaggerations of conduct which were so foreign to his own well-balanced temperament.

Claybrooke was reached at last. It was dusk, and the west wind rushed through the bare branches

of the high-standing elm-trees, in the village street. Some round-eyed children clustered on the foot-path; and Shepherd Judge,—clothed in a stout linen slop and corduroy trousers, which were stained, with much handling of sheep and working in heavy clay fallows, to the dirty yellow of his native soil,—loitered a moment to watch the carriage turn in at the Rectory gates. Then, fearing that he had displayed more interest in passing events than was wholly dignified in a man who had the care of some hundred and fifty-five ewes on his hands,—this being lambing season—he turned sharply on the staring children, and reproved them for "standing there dawdling in the road and mucking their pinafores, when they'd be a deal better abed;" and, after whistling to his two lean, half-bred, collie-dogs, walked off, with a very self-righteous back, to spend a chilly night in ministering to the needs of his flock.

Elizabeth, dazed and weary, stepped out of the carriage, and was aware of the comfortable ruddy light of a glowing fire in the well-remembered panelled hall. Aware of a glimmer of white cap-lappets and of the delicate rose-scent of Mrs. Mainwaring's garments, as that gentle woman, with murmurings of welcome and pity, folded her in her arms. Aware that Mr. Mainwaring stooped and kissed her, saying, "How d'ye do, my dear Lizzie, I'm glad——" and then that somehow his voice broke, and he added a husky "God bless you," and turned away. Aware of the presence of Bunton, the old butler, who took her wraps with a shaky

hand, gazing at her meanwhile with an appropriate and funereal expression of countenance.

She was aware, too,—for she was in that excited and highly nervous condition, of mind and body, in which one becomes vividly sensible of everything that happens around one, though it may convey no connected meaning to the mind,—that Mr. Mainwaring had regained all his wonted clearness of utterance and stateliness of manner, when he turned to Frank Lorimer and thanked him courteously for having brought Elizabeth safely home;—and that Frank replied with the easy, good-humoured indifference of a man who is conscious that he is being complimented for having performed a wholly unavoidable duty.

"You will come upstairs at once, dear child; you must be terribly tired," said Mrs. Mainwaring, drawing Elizabeth away.

Mrs. Mainwaring cultivated the old-fashioned notion that people should sit a great deal in their bedrooms when they were in sorrow. Her own greatest trouble in life, perhaps, was that she had never had what most people would reckon to be any real trouble at all. She had never had one of those comfortable and ostensible troubles, which give you the right of remaining upstairs and pulling the blinds down. She had a feeling that it was almost indecent for Elizabeth to have travelled all that long way back to England, so early in her widowhood. At least now she should have her full privilege of silence and seclusion, and that privilege should begin at once.

"I'm afraid I must say good-bye to you, Eliza-

beth, then," said Frank Lorimer, coming forward. "I must go up to town by the first train to-morrow, if Mr. Mainwaring will kindly let me,—and I dare-say you won't be down"

Elizabeth turned to him quickly. She suddenly perceived that in parting with Frank she was severing one of the last visible links that bound her to her husband, and to the larger and freer life that her marriage had brought her. Already she was sensible of the gently repressive influence that her aunt had always exercised over her. She knew intuitively that the Claybrooke atmosphere was exactly the same as ever—monotonous, unimaginative, well-regulated, insular. She knew, also, that she herself was greatly changed; and she trembled in realising that she must bid farewell to the liberty of thought and action that she had enjoyed during the last two years.

Those few words of Mrs. Mainwaring's had quite roused her from the state of exhausted acquiescence in which she had arrived. She felt that she was being appropriated, that a part was being given her to play; and she rebelled already, and turned with longing and regret to her brother-in-law.

"Can't you stay till the afternoon?" she said. "I don't want you to go, Frank; you have been very good to me."

She laid her hand upon his arm. The light of the lamp hanging above them fell full on her face, which looked unusually pale framed by her black bonnet. Her mouth was tremulous with fatigue and a disposition to tears.

Frank Lorimer, standing there, strong, comfortable and successful, felt a great compassion for this woman, with her black garments and sweet tired eyes. It was difficult for him, however, to express his sentiments. It would have taken time to put them into appropriate words. He wanted his dinner; and was conscious, too, that the Mainwarings might slightly resent — and not without reason—his taking upon himself the office of Elizabeth's consoler just at the first moment of her coming home. So he stooped towards her, and kissed the pale upturned face, saying—

"You had much better go and rest quietly now. I am afraid I must leave early to-morrow: but, you see, it will always be easy for me to run down here for a night, if you want me."

I suppose it is never wholly pleasant to a man getting on in years to see a younger man than himself kiss—however innocently—a pretty woman. It suggests contrasts, not always favourable to age. Any way this little episode jarred somewhat upon the Rector; and he ordered Bunton, rather sharply, to show Mr. Lorimer his room, as dinner would be very shortly ready.

While poor Elizabeth rests from the fatigues of her journey, in the decent seclusion that her aunt held so dear, it may be well to give some more detailed account of Mr. Mainwaring's surroundings, and of his views concerning the world in which he lived.

Claybrooke Rectory is one of those delightful old houses that are so common in the south of Midland-

shire. It is built of sandstone, the soft dull browns, and greens, and yellows of which remind one of the rich subdued colours of the falling elm-leaves in autumn. It has many gables, and steep-pitched roofs with ridge-tiles of well-quarried stone surmounting the old red tiling; and many-casemented windows with heavy stone mullions. Inside are deep window-seats;—lovely places in which to sit, when the low western sun throws long shadows from the great round-topped elm-trees across the wide stretching pastures, where sturdy black Welsh cattle and herds of "red Herefords" with stupid white faces move slowly through the rich damp grass. The house is full of low rooms, opening one out of the other; long passages with quaint little staircases up and down; unexpected nooks and corners; cupboards innumerable; and a system of attics incomprehensible to all but the very oldest inhabitant. It is a dark house, perhaps. Low ceilings and black oak floors and stairways have a habit, like many eminently respectable people and things, of being a trifle gloomy: but at the time of which we speak everything—carpets, curtains and furniture—had all grown old and faded together. Everything looked harmonious, if not gay. Everything looked calm, serious, and middle-aged. If you found it sad and did not like it, well, you could go elsewhere. Claybrooke Rectory was far too secure of its social position to care very much about pleasing chance visitors.

Here Gerald Mainwaring had brought his bride —pretty Susan Selford—nearly forty years ago.

Here they had lived ever since in comfort and prosperity.

But one thing had been denied them. There had been no sound of children's footsteps racing up and down the long passages, or playing on wet half-holidays in the great mysterious attics. No handsome boy had come home to his mother from his first day's hunting, flushed with pride and full of stories of his own remarkable prowess and marvellous adventures. Only the little brown-faced niece, who had come there almost as a baby, grew up in the quiet, stately, old house.

Mr. Mainwaring loved the child tenderly; she was the daughter of his only brother. Mrs. Mainwaring did her duty by Elizabeth: but there was always the want of the tie of common blood between them. They could never entirely understand or sympathise with each other.

The living of Claybrooke, with its various cottages and farms, has belonged to the Mainwaring family for a length of time which the hardiest local imagination scarcely ventures to measure. For a good many generations now the eldest son of each successive rector has, as a matter of course, chosen the Church for his profession, and reigned in due time as squire and clergyman of Claybrooke.

To some minds, in these critical and enlightened days, a fact such as this presents food not only for thought but for lamentation. Mr. Leeper, the Vicar of Lowcote, for instance, waxed very wroth in the face of such an appalling example of indifference to the higher conceptions of the clerical calling.

If Claybrooke had been sunk in ignorance, and a byword for drunkenness and open sin, Mr. Leeper would not have been surprised, nay, he would merely have traced the natural and proper order of cause and effect. It was irritating to him to remark that the people were at least as orderly and respectable as their neighbours; that the cottages were in excellent condition; and to learn, as he did with a sense of bewildered distress, that the church was generally well filled, both at the morning and afternoon services. Mr. Leeper's views, in themselves, were admirable: but, unfortunately, he had never studied the law of "exceptivity," and consequently often suffered from that sense of confusion and annoyance which overtakes us when we find the facts of life telling dead against some one of our most cherished theories. Had you taken the votes of the inhabitants of Claybrooke and Lowcote regarding the popularity of their respective clergymen, I am afraid you would have found—so blind is ordinary human nature to the true aspects of great Church questions,—that unimpassioned, old-fashioned, fox-hunting Mr. Mainwaring would have gained an immense majority over energetic Mr. Leeper,—notwithstanding the latter's excellent views on the temperance question, the iniquity of outdoor relief, and the urgent necessity for diocesan conferences. Mr. Leeper was furnished with a complete system for the entire reformation of his parish; but, alas! it did not seem to recognise the advantages of his system, and refused to be reformed. Mr. Mainwaring, on the other hand, had no particular views.

He based all his parochial work on plain common sense, supplemented with port wine and puddings. He did not interfere very much with his parishioners; supposing, as he said, that a man earning thirteen shillings a week had the same capacity for doing right,—but possessed the same privilege of doing wrong if he chose,—which he claimed for himself. His was not a very high ideal, possibly, of the priestly office: but it had one distinct advantage over that of some of his neighbours—namely the important one, of being easily and successfully reduced to practice.

CHAPTER III.

"I write of melancholy, by being busie to avoid melancholy.'

IT would be very pleasant to paint Elizabeth Lorimer's portrait, at this stage of her career, in all the soft pathetic shades of colour which are generally supposed to be appropriate to a first and a deep grief. It would be pleasant to draw down our mental blinds—as Mrs. Mainwaring proposed to draw down her material ones—and contemplate the figure of the young widow in a gracefully subdued light. Unfortunately the graceful point of view is so seldom the truest one. In the world within us, just as in the world without, there are deserts and sandy wastes, nasty bogs, foul lazy waters ringed round with rank weeds and coarse rushes, which no amount of amiable optimism concerning the ultimate perfectibility of human nature can altogether hide from our eyes.

Elizabeth was but half-awake as yet. She had not grasped the deeper meanings of life. In the blush of her youthful beauty and perfect physical health, she desired passionately, and before all things, to be happy.

Her intimacy with Edward Dadley had developed

within her a longing for homage and admiration. She had for the first time realised her power as a woman. When he left her so suddenly, she not only regretted him, but she was hungry for more of the pleasant sensations and strange excitements which his admiration of her had produced. She was sore, proud, angry—just in the state of mind to seize on any change or on any new excitement which might present itself. Consequently she was pleased and flattered by Robert Lorimer's attentions. He lived in a different world from that which she had been accustomed to. She longed after all that was beautiful, and artistic, and poetic, in life; and it seemed to her that this man was in a position to give her what she longed for. He fascinated her intelligence, and the possibilities of life with him seemed very great and pleasant to her. Many of the noblest qualities of her nature found a ready response and sympathy in him. It needs a long and hard experience, sometimes, to enable one to distinguish accurately between those emotions which come from the heart and those which come from the head. Poor Elizabeth did not realise—like too many noble and pure-minded young girls—that the heart is an all-important factor in marriage.

Perhaps if Robert Lorimer had lived, she would have given him in time all the strong and devoted affection which was latent within her. As it was, before she became accustomed to her new life and settled down with open eyes to live it, her husband's illness came. Elizabeth had never been brought nearly in contact with suffering and death before,

and they were appalling, almost repulsive, to her. They seemed strange, unnatural, hideous. In shrinking from the sight of suffering, she shrank a little from the sufferer too. She had moments of passionate tenderness towards her husband, moments of wild despair, when she realised that he must really leave her: but generally she was merely conscious of a confused sense of fear and dumb rebellion against her lot.

For a while after her arrival at Claybrooke Rectory Elizabeth was too tired, both in mind and body, to have much will of her own. The momentary flash of feeling, which she had experienced when she parted with her brother-in-law, died down again quietly. Her chief desire was for rest; and she submitted to her aunt Mrs. Mainwaring's small views, and arrangements for her good, with considerable docility.

Claybrooke was very soothing to her. It was associated chiefly with her quiet girlhood; there was little enough to remind her of the troubles and disappointments of the last two years. Now and again some chance word or trivial incident would arouse all the storm of feeling that was sleeping within her, and she would ask fiercely why all these things had happened to her? Why life, which ought to be so sweet, and which she was so capable of enjoying, was so early marred and spoiled for her? She had but raised the cup to her lips, when fate had dashed it from her hand, and now it lay shattered and broken at her feet, while all her promised joy was spilt upon the ground. At times she felt almost

angry with her dead husband, as though he had wantonly left her to battle her way through this difficult world alone.

Sometimes, on the other hand, she would suffer a paroxysm of regret and sorrow. In the night, when there was no sound to break the stillness but that of the wind moaning about the gables of the old house, or the distant bark of a watch-dog at some lone farm-house down in the quiet meadows, Elizabeth would start from her sleep, oppressed by a sudden sense of loneliness and terror. She would seem to see, once more, the lofty room, shaded with closed shutters from the glare of the fierce Southern sunlight; the sister of charity in her dark dress, her smooth peaceful face framed by her great white cap, moving softly about; and the sick man, who, through long, weary, sunny days and restless nights, had lain, with a fine and steadfast courage, facing the awful angel of death and schooling himself to bid farewell—not without bitter pain and sorrow but without a murmur of repining—to this kindly and familiar world, and to the beautiful young wife whom he loved so well.

Remembering these things, Elizabeth would stretch out longing arms into the stillness and darkness; and then remembering, too, that here that deep debt of love could never be repaid, would fling herself down upon the pillows again, and sob in lonely misery, till the windows of her room began to glimmer faintly through the chintz curtains, while the still gray dawn broke over the damp and misty pastures, and the birds began to twitter about the

eaves, and comfortable, reassuring, domestic sounds told that the old Rectory-house was awake once more and getting ready for the work of another quiet uneventful day.

But Elizabeth was perhaps a little unfortunately unconventional. She could not play at feeling, because it was the pretty thing under the circumstances. When these storms of emotion came down upon her, she struggled out of them as quickly as she could. She still wanted supremely to be happy; and though she felt bruised and wounded, her life was yet whole in her. She would pause awhile and take breath; and then try conclusions with the world again.

As the days lengthened, the rooks became noisy over domestic matters in the big elm-trees by the church; the starlings, breaking up the flocks in which they had danced and circled together during the winter months, began to haunt water-spouts and hollow trees; the earth smelt fresh and sweet under the soft westerly wind; and spring flowers began to cheer the bare bosoms of the garden beds. It was pleasant then to Elizabeth to wander out with the Rector over his plough-lands and pastures, while Billy and Boxer, the two fox-terriers, rushed wildly about, discovering imaginary rats and rabbits in every hedge, and Rufus, the brown retriever, full of years and dignity, trotted slowly at his master's heels.

Mr. Mainwaring had a feeling of delicacy in talking to his niece of her own troubles.—Politics Mr. Mainwaring had never reckoned as very well suited

to the comprehension of the female mind; and Church matters, with Ritualists splitting up the poor old Establishment inside, and Rationalists battering it from without, seemed to him more of a subject for bitter indignation and invective than for ordinary conversation. It happened, therefore, that the Rector's talk was generally of an unexciting character, dealing chiefly with the land and the crops, interspersed with kindly bits of gossip about neighbours and parishioners, and with reminiscences of historic runs with the hounds, the memorable taking of brooks, or scrambling through impenetrable "bullfinches." Elizabeth listened gladly to this simple talk. It demanded no mental exertion on her part, and yet it kept her from more intimate, and from sadder thoughts and speculations. The Rector was satisfied with her quiet attention. It was pleasant to him to say familiar things which he had often said before. He believed that Elizabeth was quite sufficiently amused, and meanwhile he was glad to do a proper amount of talking, without touching on subjects of a serious or controversial character. Mr. Mainwaring had given up most of the problems of life as insoluble; and he was inclined to be a little vexed when anything was said which seemed to suggest that they might not be so, and that it was the duty of reasonable human beings to struggle to find a solution of them.

It often strikes one as unfortunate that women are not more capable of letting each other alone. Mrs. Mainwaring was quite incapable of dealing with Elizabeth in the same simple tolerant fashion as the

Rector. She was not willing to take her niece for granted. She wanted agreement of sentiment and assurances of feeling, which it was not in the nature of the younger woman to give.

Mrs. Mainwaring had, as a girl, unquestioningly accepted certain social traditions and formulas. She had—owing partly no doubt to her comfortable circumstances and secure position — clung to them tenaciously through the course of her life; and now they ruled her completely. If you deprived her of them she would have felt like a lost child, uncertain what to do and where to turn. The foundations being shaken, the righteous—as represented by Mrs. Mainwaring—would have been in most doleful case. She was gentle, tender-hearted, and calmly devout: but her imagination was small, and her sympathies were narrow. She was lovable: but it was impossible to deny that she was rather limited. Elizabeth alarmed, distressed, and surprised her at times. Elizabeth's faults and temptations were incomprehensible to her. She was always sensible that Elizabeth did not repeat her experiences, or fulfil her ideal under given circumstances. There had always been a want of common ground on which she and her niece could meet safely; and the little space which had formerly existed seemed to have dwindled considerably in extent since Elizabeth's marriage.

When the first strangeness and pathos of her return began to wear off Mrs. Mainwaring grew a little dissatisfied. She was unconsciously on the watch for her niece's failings and shortcomings.

Unfortunately Elizabeth was not a great diplomatist, and had a tendency towards a certain directness of thought and speech, which often caused her to pluck, rather rudely, at the conventional wrappings with which her aunt decently covered her own convictions and desires.

One afternoon, about six weeks after Elizabeth had come back to Claybrooke, she and Mrs. Mainwaring were together in the pretty little panelled sitting-room upstairs, in which the latter lady generally spent her mornings. There Mrs. Mainwaring made up tidy accounts, and ordered her household and her husband's parish with dignified kindness and unruffled composure.

Elizabeth was sitting in one of the deep window-seats, her hands resting idly in her lap. Out of doors everything seemed to be feeling the pleasant influences of the spring, and awakening in hope and freshness to a new lease of life. The elms looked soft and bloomy with swelling buds; the pastures were green with the springing grass; the sober midland landscape lay sleeping in the pleasant sunshine. Away among the trees in the distance, on the other side of the brook, Elizabeth could see the quaint, old, red-brick chimneys of the Manor-House.—Her mind was full of gentle regret, and yet of hope. At one-and-twenty one can easily, in fancy at least, call a new world into existence to restore the balance of the old.

Mrs. Mainwaring, with her pretty faded face, sitting knitting by the fire so serenely,—Mrs. Mainwaring, who had never known a tangible trouble in

all her life,—was perhaps really more deserving of pity and sympathy than this beautiful young woman, with her obvious sorrows and her heavy widow's gown.

"Smart told me the other day, Aunt Susan," said Elizabeth, still looking out over the sunny country, "that Miss Dadley died last year. I hadn't heard it. What has been done with the Manor-House?"

"It is an unpleasant subject," answered Mrs. Mainwaring slowly. "Mr. Dadley behaved very strangely, considering the length of time the place had been in the family. He sold everything."

"I wonder why," said Elizabeth.

"Oh! nobody knows," replied Mrs. Mainwaring. "Sir Frederic Melvin bought all the land, with the exception of one or two fields adjoining Garner's farm which your uncle took. But everything was sold. The very chairs and tables we had known for the last thirty years—everything went. There was a want of consideration and proper feeling about it," added Mrs. Mainwaring severely. "Your uncle was very much annoyed."

Elizabeth turned and gazed out of window again.

"Have you heard anything of Edward Dadley, lately, Aunt Susan?" she said.

Mrs. Mainwaring glanced up quickly from her knitting: but she could only see Elizabeth's profile as a silhouette against a background of window-panes, and in that position it was impossible to gain any idea of her expression.

"No; nothing at all," she answered quietly.

"Ah!" responded Elizabeth.

It would have been difficult to her to say, at that moment, whether she felt relieved or a little disappointed. She sat quite still for a minute or two without turning her head; then, getting up, she walked across to where her aunt sat knitting by the fire, and knelt down before her on the rug.

"Dear Aunt Susie," she said, "I want you to be very kind, and do me a great favour."

Mrs. Mainwaring only smiled; she had a vague forecasting that Elizabeth was going to ask her to do something which she would not the least like to do. She also wished that Elizabeth would sit down on a chair like an ordinary person, when she asked favours. Mrs. Mainwaring objected to seeing people kneel, except in church, or at prayers. The position seemed to her a little exaggerated.

"Will you ask Frank Lorimer and his wife to come down here for a week at Easter?" Elizabeth went on,—"They could get away from London then, I think, and I should be so glad to see them."

Mrs. Mainwaring's smile died away. She did not in the least wish to accede to her niece's request: but it was decidedly awkward to refuse it point-blank.

"I know you don't care to have strangers staying in the house," continued Elizabeth: "but I am very fond of them—I mean of the Lorimers;—and Frank was wonderfully good to me, you know, during that sad time abroad."

Mrs. Mainwaring waited a moment, while she fingered her knitting-pins a little nervously.

"I don't know, Elizabeth, what to say," she answered at last: "but I am afraid your uncle would not quite like it."

Mrs. Mainwaring found it tiresomely difficult to say what she wanted to say, with Elizabeth kneeling there and looking up at her so sweetly.

"Dear me, why not?" exclaimed Elizabeth.

"Your uncle and Mr. Lorimer did not get on very well together the night you came home. They differed about politics, I believe," answered Mrs. Mainwaring evasively.

"Dear me," said Elizabeth again.

She got up off the rug and stood opposite to her aunt. She felt hurt and annoyed at Mrs. Mainwaring's manner.

"It must have been a very serious difference of opinion," she added, "if it should be sufficient to make Uncle Gerald really object to Frank's coming here."

"In point of fact," said Mrs. Mainwaring, looking down at her knitting, but feeling far more comfortable and self-possessed now that her niece was no longer kneeling so close to her,—"In point of fact, Elizabeth, Mr. Lorimer is not quite the sort of person we have been accustomed to have here."

"Possibly not," said Elizabeth, wilfully mistaking her meaning. "This neighbourhood is not very brilliant. Clever men are not very common about here."

"I was not speaking merely of this neighbourhood, Elizabeth," said Mrs. Mainwaring, looking up with some dignity.

She would not condescend to define
cularly the society in which she had alw
but the memory of many generations
crowded into her mind. Everybody kn
Selfords were, and knew—or ought to know—the sort of society they had always lived in.

Elizabeth's face flushed painfully. Her pride was touched, and her loyalty towards her husband demanded that she should speak. She waited a moment, for she found it a little difficult to control her utterance.

"You forget, Aunt Susan, that Frank Lorimer is my husband's brother," she said at last.

Mrs. Mainwaring winced. It was almost coarse, she thought, to put the matter in that light: but there was a large fund of obstinacy in this fragile, gentle-looking, little lady's nature. She had not the smallest disposition to haul down her colours because Elizabeth had not the delicacy to perceive how much out of place her last observation was.

"Mr. Lorimer was a barrister," said Mrs. Mainwaring.

"And Frank is a newspaper editor," rejoined Elizabeth, speaking as quietly as she could. "But the two men were brothers, Aunt Susan; and you can hardly mean to imply that my husband's claims"—she paused a moment—"to be admitted into the society you have been accustomed to depended upon his profession."

Mrs. Mainwaring stood up too; she was extremely pained and distressed.

"This conversation has taken a most unfortu-

nate turn," she said. "I think you must perceive yourself how unbecoming it is, Elizabeth, under present circumstances. I really cannot discuss the question further. I must entreat you to let it drop."

And she slowly and severely rolled up her long strip of knitting.

Elizabeth had generally repented after one of these final rebukes of her aunt's. She had generally been convicted of sin—more from habit, perhaps, than from anything else—and had humbled herself; but this time something deeper than her own personal pride was touched. All her better nature was roused in defence of her husband's memory. Mrs. Mainwaring, by implication at least, had slighted him; and Elizabeth bitterly and fiercely resented the slight. She did not answer, but remained standing near the fire, with her eyes fixed upon the floor.

Mrs. Mainwaring finished rolling up her work in silence and moved away. Just as she reached the door she turned and said in her usual quiet even tones,—

"I am going to drive over to Slowby this afternoon, Elizabeth. I have ordered the closed carriage, so that there would be no objection to your coming, if you cared to do so."

"No, thank you," answered Elizabeth shortly. "I prefer remaining at home."

She was determined to make no step, this time, towards a reconciliation with her Aunt Susan. She went hastily to her own room, and, throwing on a hat and jacket, went out quickly by a side door

into the garden, being careful to avoid a meeting with Mrs. Mainwaring, for whom the carriage was waiting in front of the house.

There is a broad walk leading out of the Rectory garden, at Claybrooke, towards the church. It is divided from the main road, which runs parallel to it, by a belt of trees and underwood; on the other side is a sunk fence, beyond which stretch the pastures, sloping down towards the brook that strayed through the valley, about half a mile away. In the winter this walk is sheltered from the bitter east winds by the belt of wood, and in summer pleasantly shaded by the overhanging trees; while to the westward, across the sunk fence, the view—such as it is—is wholly uninterrupted.

Elizabeth had dreamed many pretty dreams, during her quiet uneventful girlhood, pacing up and down this walk, while her eyes wandered over the still green country, and her thoughts wandered far into the coming years, coloured by bright hopes and charming fancies. Her steps turned instinctively towards it now, though her hopes were no longer very bright, and though realities had arisen, like Pharaoh's "lean kine," and devoured all her fair fancies one by one.

She was hurt and angry; full of tenderness towards her dead husband and towards his family. She knew that Mrs. Mainwaring had not spoken without thought and intention. The narrow groove along which life at Claybrooke moved already began to worry Elizabeth. She had already observed that many opinions which she expressed were unpalat-

able to her aunt; that the latter feared she was breaking free, in a somewhat dangerous manner, from received doctrines; that she was too anxious to think for herself. She knew that Mrs. Mainwaring resented all eccentricity, all unusualness. Elizabeth suspected that her aunt accused the Frank Lorimers of encouraging her to take her own way, and that their influence was considered undesirable.

She stood still in the middle of the walk. The rooks were flying, in a long black line, home to their half-made nests in the elms by the church; the children shouted at their play in the village street; and the thin spring sunshine lay softly on the face of the green meadows. Away across the brook Elizabeth could still see the twisted chimneys of the old Manor-House above the trees.

For a moment the thought came to her of how different all her life would have been if she had married her first love—the good-tempered fresh-faced young squire,—and had settled down to the quiet life of the country, with its simple round of duties and pleasures. The quiet country life would have been pleasant enough to her two years ago: but now she had had experience of another and more exciting sort of living. Elizabeth was very young still. Though she had suffered, though she had been cruelly disappointed, she had not yet said her "vanitas vanitatum." She longed after all that is included in that magic word, culture,—after books, and music, and art; after fanciful furnishings and beautiful colours. She believed that the philo-

sopher's stone was still to be found; and she longed, poor child, to set out in quest of it. She owed her aunt and uncle a debt for their love and care of her: but her loyalty to her husband ranged itself alongside her desire for beauty and knowledge, against her simple duty to those who had stood to her in the place of parents.

She could see that remaining at Claybrooke implied complete submission to Mrs. Mainwaring's small moral and social code. When the time of her mourning should be over, there was no more exhilarating prospect before her than dreary dinners with local magnates; solemn afternoon calls with Mrs. Mainwaring; visits to the schools and to certain cottages; occasionally the holding of a stall at some bazaar for the restoration of a neighbouring church; now and again a wearisome garden party. Of conversation, none worth the name—no change, no new interests, nothing but the eminently "trivial round" and the remarkably "common task." Meanwhile Elizabeth seemed to see herself growing older, and grayer, and duller, as one quiet year slipped away after another. Now she rebelled against the stagnation of Claybrooke; five or ten years hence she would be accustomed to it—nay, at last she might even come to like it.

She was capable of exciting herself very greatly with her own speculations. The picture she had called up of her future in the still, sleepy, midland village was intolerable to her. She desired desperately to get away and cast in her lot with the Frank Lorimers. She saw clearly that no middle

course would be possible for long—she would have, sooner or later, to make her choice between her own and her husband's relations.

As she stood, full of uncertainty and of conflicting feelings, in the spring sunshine, the Rector—riding home over the fields from visiting some outlying cottages—stopped his comfortable fat cob on the other side of the sunk fence, and looked at her.

"Ah! Lizzie," he said, smiling a little sadly, "it is very pleasant to see you moving about this old place again. I am growing an old man, my dear, and I like a beautiful young face to look at."

CHAPTER IV.

"Sir," he said, "I take stock in everything that concerns anybody."

MRS. MAINWARING, meanwhile, rumbling along in the closed carriage towards Slowby, was as unhappy as a person supported by a strong sense of accomplished duty can well be. The coachman's livery fitted excellently—it was quite pleasant to behold his back;—the horses trotted cheerily along the broad highroad; the country looked pretty in the afternoon sunshine; the shopkeepers in Slowby, moreover, would hurry with unfeigned satisfaction to their doors, anxious to supply any quantity of any article that Mrs. Mainwaring might desire, when they saw her carriage stopping in High Street. All these things were wont to yield her a gentle sense of gratification, for, notwithstanding her traditions, Mrs. Mainwaring was fundamentally a very simple-minded person. She enjoyed her own respectable and dignified position, and still more she enjoyed the recognition of her respectability and dignity by others. It is distinctly agreeable to be persuaded that the world in general shares in our own good opinion of ourselves. To-day the worthy lady ought,

surely, to have felt even more than usually serene and satisfied, for she had got her own way. She knew that, after their late conversation, Elizabeth's pride would prevent her making any more inconvenient suggestions respecting a visit from the Frank Lorimers. Mrs. Mainwaring had fought and won the little battle very successfully. She had her desire: but, alas! together with her desire, she had leanness withal in her soul.

She believed, and rightly, that she loved Elizabeth more truly than she loved any other human being except her husband, Gerald Mainwaring: but Mrs. Mainwaring was not a very acute thinker, and had never perceived that she loved, not Elizabeth as she really was, but Elizabeth as she might be,—if that strong-natured young woman renounced her individuality and submitted herself entirely to her aunt's guidance. She loved, in fact, a phantom Elizabeth of her own creating, and was perpetually distressed and annoyed with the real Elizabeth, who bore but a slight resemblance to her ideal. Mrs. Mainwaring just now was feeling acutely pained at having had such a disturbing scene with her niece; and was confused and bewildered by the way in which Elizabeth had spoken, and by the view which she had taken of the matter. She could not comprehend how any right-minded person could see things from a different standpoint to her own.

Mrs. Mainwaring had never been entirely satisfied with Elizabeth's marriage. She suspected a want of great-grandfathers in the Lorimer family. She did not go as far as her maid Smart, who,

being blessed with aristocratic ideas, had suggested on hearing of Robert Lorimer's death, "that she hoped now Miss Elizabeth would take her maiden name again." She did not certainly go as far as that: but she had cherished a silent hope that the connection would be quietly dropped, and that Elizabeth would come to regard her marriage merely as a slightly unfortunate episode, and adopt the Mainwaring and Selford view of things in general.

Mrs. Mainwaring could not ignore the fact that Frank Lorimer edited a newspaper. No one whom she knew had ever married a newspaper editor, or had taken to that sort of employment as a profession. Some people can accept no fact without a precedent. Then, too, from hints that Elizabeth had dropped, Mrs. Mainwaring feared that the Frank Lorimers knew all sorts of queer people—writers, artists, musicians, actors. People who live by their brains and their talents instead of on their means, are always a little doubtful. Mrs. Mainwaring associated such persons with lodgings and tinned meat, and with an absence of horses and carriages, and servants with long and admirable personal characters.

This good lady's ideas of art did not carry her beyond portraits painted by Gainsborough and Sir Joshua; and it is to be feared that even they were interesting to her more as testifying to the high respectability of the families whose deceased members they so flatteringly represented, than as examples of the great masters' work. In the matter of music,

she was vexed if the village choir sang flagrantly out of time or tune on Sunday in church; and she liked to hear a ballad given in the mild and wholly unimaginative way in which young ladies and gentlemen do perform ballads, when possessed by a praiseworthy desire to relieve the tedium of the long evening which usually follows a seven o'clock country dinner-party; any touch of true passion or even of true pathos would have alarmed and confused her with a suggestion of slight impropriety. From the religious point of view Mrs. Mainwaring had no objection to the stage: but she recoiled from the idea of publicity, and could not conceive how a really pure woman, or high-minded man, could be willing to earn their bread by representing fictitious characters and ill-regulated emotions before a large number of spectators. In all ages, I suppose, there have been a good many minds to which the notion of a paid amuser of the public has appeared contemptible and degrading. As for Mrs. Mainwaring, she failed to perceive any very distinct social difference between one of the great leaders of the dramatic profession and the strolling acrobat, with his stock-in-trade of a little carpet and pair of spangled tights, who will go through a series of painful contortions on the dusty pavement, in the hope of gleaning a meagre harvest of peradventure pennies from the passers-by. These being her views, it certainly was not very surprising that Mrs. Mainwaring should reckon it almost her duty to do her best to wean Elizabeth from relations, whose standpoint was so radically different from her own. Yet that afternoon,

as she drove over to Slowby, Mrs. Mainwaring was oppressed with a lurking fear that Elizabeth might be alienated from her in the process. Life is very difficult sometimes, and human beings very hard to manage, even when we are entirely sure that our intentions are excellent and the end we propose to attain eminently desirable.

But it was not merely upon her near relations that poor Elizabeth was fated to have rather a confusing effect.

The neighbours, who had called when she first returned, with inquiries,—always met by Bunton with the time-honoured and enigmatical reply, "that Mrs. Lorimer was as well as could be expected,"—now began to come to Claybrooke Rectory with a distinct intention of seeing the young widow, and judging for themselves of her appearance and state of mind. Not only were her present circumstances decidedly romantic and interesting, but she had, so it was said, during the last twelve months, wandered over half the countries of Southern Europe—local imaginations had considerably extended the area of Elizabeth's peregrinations. Most of the natives of Midlandshire feel a little insecure out of their own county, and would appear, for some occult reason, to have a considerable suspicion of foreign travel. They regard those persons who indulge in it as remarkably daring and slightly dangerous at the same time. Paris is immoral, Italy priest-ridden, Germany atheistical, Switzerland absurdly mountainous and undoubtedly a bad hunting country,—we all know these things in Midlandshire, and con-

sequently most of us stay at home. At the same time, when any adventurous wight does return from foreign parts, we are sensible of a certain flutter of excitement, which we do our best to conceal under a smiling and slightly contemptuous manner. It follows, therefore, that Elizabeth not only claimed attention in virtue of her recent bereavement, but that she was looked upon as a sort of spiritual daughter of Christopher Columbus and of Captain Cook.

Lady Melvin, stout, dignified, and kindly, drove over in state from Melvin's Keeping, and indulged in many well-intentioned commonplaces, which she wished to be sympathetic and consolatory, but which were, in fact, extremely tedious.

Mrs. Adnitt, the wife of the squire of Lowcote, came too, desiring sincerely to say everything that was becoming and appropriate to the occasion: but, out of the fulness of the heart the mouth will speak, and she soon exhausted her stock of sentiments regarding Elizabeth's sad loss, and began pouring a catalogue of the sins and offences of that much-misconstrued gentleman, Mr. Leeper, into Mrs. Mainwaring's not unwilling ears.—Mr. Leeper actually wanted what he called "free and open sittings." Imagine her, Mrs. Adnitt, and the Squire getting rather late to church some Sunday morning—the Squire did certainly take some time over his breakfast, and liked, too, to go down to the stables and just have a "look round" before starting for church, so they were sometimes a little late,—imagine, then, their arriving and finding Jones, the Radical baker,

who openly refused his vote to the Conservative candidate at the last general election, calmly established in their time-honoured family pew. Such a possibility was alarming and distressing in a high degree; and yet obviously such a thing might easily happen if the sittings were all free. Mr. Leeper, like many other prophets, had but a scant amount of honour in his own country.

The Harbages called another day. They drove over, a party of six, in a hired vehicle—a hybrid kind of waggonette, with a distant suggestion of a carrier's cart about it,—blessed with a canary-coloured body and wheels. This machine is much patronised in the district around Highthorne by those of the inhabitants whose circumstances are not sufficiently affluent to admit of their keeping a horse and carriage of their own. Mr. Harbage always drove; that is to say, he held the reins and fished gently at the horse's back with the whip. His driving in no way resembled that of Jehu the son of Nimshi, and the waggonette proceeded very slowly over the face of the earth. But Mrs. Harbage made a great point of her husband's driving, all the same; for she was possessed with a strong desire to impress the passers-by with a sense of her entire ownership of the vehicle. This was a very innocent fraud, deceiving nobody, inasmuch as the yellow body and wheels are perfectly well known to every one on that side of the county: but it afforded Mrs. Harbage a little anxious satisfaction, and saved an extra shilling for the driver, and as it merely caused other people some kindly amuse-

ment, perhaps it was, on the whole, as good an arrangement as most other arrangements in this piecemeal world.

Mrs. Harbage, leaving the two younger girls in the carriage when the party at last reached Claybrooke Rectory, proceeded into the drawing-room with her eldest daughter and Emily, her husband mildly bringing up the rear.

Mrs. Harbage had driven over from Highthorne, that day, cheered by a sense that the mighty had fallen and that she was going to have the delicate privilege of seeing them lie prostrate. She had, indeed, brought Emily on purpose that that dear girl might realise all the sorrow and disaster she had escaped by remaining in a state of single blessedness. But Elizabeth Lorimer looked so serene and handsome, notwithstanding the melancholy suggestions of her deep mourning dress; the drawing-room at the Rectory was so redolent of solid comfort; the tea so excellent; the cream and cake so rich; Bunton so dignified and condescending in helping the ladies to climb down from, and later to struggle up into, the waggonette,—that poor Mrs. Harbage began to be doubtful whether the mighty had fallen after all, and whether Emily really had, on the whole, so very much cause for thanksgiving. The thought of an unpaid coal-merchant's bill and butcher's book haunted her mind: and a sense of the curiously unequal division of the goods of this world oppressed her spirit. It may be difficult for the rich to enter into the kingdom of heaven: but experience had taught Mrs.

Harbage, long ago, that it is often difficult for the poor—harassed by care and worry, and weary with work—to find time to think about the kingdom of heaven at all.

Other friends and neighbours called too; and mostly went away with the impression that Elizabeth Lorimer was, perhaps, a trifle better than "could be expected;" and that she was quite unlikely to drain dry their stock of amiable surface sympathy, by making too great demands upon it. Perhaps they were just a little annoyed, as they had counted on the circumstances of their several visits to Claybrooke Rectory for supplying them, both with a distinct emotion, and with a subject for much subsequent conversation. The ladies, indeed, permitted themselves a mild revenge, by hinting at Elizabeth's apparent insensibility to her position; and their ruffled plumes were by no means smoothed down by the fact that husbands, brothers, and sons—who somewhat against their will had been inveigled into paying this visit of condolence—invariably remarked on the way home that "Mrs. Lorimer certainly was, taken all round, one of the handsomest women that they—the speakers—had ever seen." It is not a little trying in a very quiet neighbourhood to be disappointed of an emotion: but how greatly is that disappointment embittered, when the very person who has caused it is pronounced, by those whose views of female beauty are of peculiar importance to you, to be an unusually pretty woman!

Elizabeth, though embarrassed and slightly irri-

tated at being thus regarded in the light of a show which all the country-side thought it had a right to come and gaze at, was behaving with considerable self-control and moderation. Mr. Mainwaring's little speech had moved her, and had laid the rebellious spirit within her at least for a time. She studiously avoided any allusion to their late controversy with her aunt; and though both women were sensible that there was a certain want of cordiality in their relations,—that they had taken a step apart, and must look at each other in future through the separating medium of a distinct difference of opinion, things were going on very fairly well on the whole. One day, certainly, there seemed some danger of a sharp collision: but they both were wanting in the courage necessary for a real battle.

As the warm weather came on, Elizabeth began to have a strong distaste for her heavy, black, stuff dresses, with their interminable crape trimmings. They seemed so conventional and unimaginative, so hot and dusty, altogether such a blot on the fair hopeful spring-time, with its delicate scents and colours, and promise of radiant blossoms.

Elizabeth had a very limited belief in "the right thing." She was a little disposed to tilt at custom, as Don Quixote tilted at the proverbial windmills; and with the same result. For custom, like the windmills, would certainly stand firm, while poor Elizabeth, like the gallant though fantastic knight, would only get an unpleasant roll in the dust for her pains. In time experience teaches most of us that custom is, on the whole, wise in her verdicts:

but all vigorous and generous young souls have to purchase their conviction of her wisdom at the cost of a few tumbles—humbling no doubt in the present, yet very salutary in the long-run.

Elizabeth argued thus,—not only did the crape-covered gowns weary her, but surely her husband, who delighted to see her enhance her natural beauty by wearing graceful and becoming garments, would have been the first to entreat her to lay off these ugly conventional trappings of woe. Surely she did not need these commonplace, almost vulgar, outward signs of sorrow to keep memory green, and remind her of that pathetic parting down by the purple Mediterranean? These unsightly stuffy dresses made her think no whit more tenderly of the dead; while they seemed to her painfully out of harmony with the awakening beauty of nature, which Robert Lorimer had loved so well.

She had pulled the offending dresses out on to her bed one morning, and was standing over them, in company with Smart her aunt's maid, regarding them with an air of strong distaste, when Mrs. Mainwaring herself—with her neat little figure, delicately pink cheeks, and spotless white cap with its waving lappets—came quietly into the room. She stopped and looked at the pile of black garments with just a faint suggestion of surprise.

Elizabeth was sensible of a restraining influence directly. Mrs. Mainwaring's gentle astonishment seemed the visible symbol of all those recognised proprieties of life respecting "mourning," which Elizabeth was just proposing to violate. Mrs. Main-

waring's surprise implied the surprise of all respectable and well-regulated persons. Individually, she was not very alarming perhaps: but as the representative of a widely-accepted and deeply-cherished idea she became very formidable, and Elizabeth found herself shifting her ground and moderating her desires, with a rapidity which she had to admit was both humiliating and amusing.

"I have been looking through all my clothes with Smart, Aunt Susan," she said. "They are so dreadfully hot and heavy, that I must have something done to them."

The pink tint deepened a little in Mrs. Mainwaring's cheeks; she had a painful sense that she was on the edge of one of those struggles in which her love of her niece, and her love of tradition, must meet in battle array.

"You cannot, of course, think of making any change in your mourning so soon, my dear," she said, with gentle decision.

"These gowns are fearfully hot, now that the weather is getting so warm," Elizabeth observed, avoiding any more direct reply.

Mrs. Mainwaring turned over one or two of the dresses slowly. She wished to appear open to conviction. She knew by experience that mere assertions carried very little weight with Elizabeth: but, it was so utterly obvious to her mind that within six months of a husband's death no amount of crape could be too great to testify to his widow's decent grief, that she found it impossible to sympathise in her niece's evident desire for some modifica-

tion of her costume. Mrs. Mainwaring was as far from questioning the dictates of custom, as she was from questioning the existence of the sun in the pale spring sky outside.

At last she said, looking rather at Smart than at Elizabeth—

"Dresses of this description are always worn for at least one year under such circumstances, are they not?"

Smart, having a strong desire to remain neutral, and run no risk of offending either of the contending parties, pulled the dresses about a little, with a critical and professional air, but wisely said nothing.

"Anyway," observed Elizabeth, with a touch of impatience, "I must get something thinner for the summer. I should half die of heat if I wore these things all through the hot weather."

"The stuffs are very thick, ma'am," remarked Smart, putting in a timid oar.

Mrs. Mainwaring stood quite still and silent, feeling most unnecessarily unhappy. To persons of her rather narrow nature trivial matters are of almost dreadful importance—a question of a little more or less crape will often be more painfully agitating to such a woman than the fall of an empire is to a philosopher. She felt acutely, too, that Smart was deserting her meanly and going over to the enemy; that she stood alone in the defence of sacred custom and propriety. To some people it is infinitely depressing to be in the minority.

"I think," said Elizabeth, suddenly struck by a

happy idea, "I'll write to Fanny and ask her to get me some summer things—thin, you know, and yet suitable."

"Fanny?" inquired Mrs. Mainwaring, looking up.

"Yes, Fanny Lorimer—my sister-in-law," answered Elizabeth a little defiantly. "She dresses admirably, Aunt Susan. She would find me exactly the right thing."

"I should have thought it would have been wiser to trust to your own taste in this matter—or mine," said Mrs. Mainwaring with mild dignity.

"But, in any case, the gowns must have been made up in London," answered Elizabeth, "so it is really simpler to get some one to choose them who is on the spot."

"There is an excellent dressmaker in Slowby, Elizabeth," said Mrs. Mainwaring, with a certain finality in her tone.

Smart was present, and she would not let this discussion degenerate into anything approaching to wrangling. She had stated her own opinion; she had indicated the right road to Elizabeth. Mrs. Mainwaring felt that circumstances were against her: had she been alone with her niece, she thought it would have been her duty to say more. As it was, she determined at least to save her own dignity. She had protested; now she washed her hands of the matter, and retired in good order from the scene of the fray; leaving to Elizabeth—along with her rather doubtful victory—a sense of discomfort and indecision, which resulted in her not writing to Fanny Lorimer, but putting on the heavy gowns again and

wearing them, with what patience she might, to the end of the summer.

This little episode did not tend to increase the limited cordiality existing between the two ladies. Elizabeth might submit outwardly: but her spirit remained free and uninfluenced. Each of these differences of opinion helped to clear away the mists of habit from her eyes. She ceased to take Mrs. Mainwaring for granted; she stood outside her, and looked at her, and judged her. The judgments of the young are cruelly just. They have not learned by experience of life, and experience of their own failings and shortcomings, to temper justice with mercy. They cause the unhappy culprit to stand in the full glare of the untempered sunlight, and notice every spot, and blemish, and rent, with terrible accuracy. The young are charming, and beautiful, and poetic, and the sight of them stirs our more languid pulses with the memory of past joys and hopes: but, when it comes to judgment and criticism of conduct, in pity, give us the tried hard-worked man or woman, who has fainted and wrestled, and through much tribulation has gained a touch of the divine compassion that is not "extreme to mark what is done amiss."

It is piteous to think that matters of crape and black stuff, trifles of etiquette or of social standing, may loosen the cords of love and embitter life far more than great sorrows. But truly the rubs and worries of every day, differences of temperament, little misunderstandings which almost inevitably arise between persons of two different generations,

are enough to cloud the sunshine and turn the milk of human kindness very sour. These wretched trifles —hardly deserving of a moment's serious consideration—have the power, in course of time, of changing human relationships, from the deepest source of joy, into a perfect flood of discomfort. It is not without a certain truth that Cupid has been always figured with a broad band over his pretty eyes. When he takes off that band, and looks the object of his devotion fairly in the face, he is apt to become more of a critic than a lover; and the critic has always a savour of contempt in his composition.

The last two years of her life, which had been spent with a man her equal in intelligence, and her superior in culture and knowledge of the world, had removed the band from Elizabeth's eyes as far as Mrs. Mainwaring was concerned, and she regarded that lady's conduct and action with rather unfortunate clearness. She had ceased to believe in Mrs. Mainwaring's small social code. She knew that there was a great section of the world to which Mrs. Mainwaring would appear very provincial and unimportant. She had learned that all social judgments are relative rather than absolute; and her aunt's belief in the infallibility of her own "set" was very irritating to Elizabeth. With the logical intolerance of youth and inexperience, she went farther still. Having discovered that Mrs. Mainwaring was narrow-minded in some matters, she concluded that she was narrow-minded in all. She did not admit this to herself in so many words, it is true: but she got into a habit of expecting her aunt's views

to be inadequate and unimaginative, till almost every word the poor lady said raised an inclination to opposition within her.

Towards her uncle Elizabeth's feeling was quite different. Cupid still had his eyes bandaged, and had not exchanged love for criticism. To begin with, there was the tie of common blood between the uncle and niece; the sympathy which comes of hereditary instincts, and which often unites persons whose characters may, on the surface, seem to be very different. For Mr. Mainwaring's wishes and desires Elizabeth had an instinctive regard. She was almost contented to be dull at Claybrooke, if by remaining there she made him happier and gave him pleasure.

It was not only his true fatherly affection for her which made Mr. Mainwaring so dear to Elizabeth; she was a person singularly influenced by her early emotions and impressions. To most people, I suppose, the Rector would not have appeared a very romantic figure: but to Elizabeth's childish imagination, on one of his great raking hunters, clothed with the dignity of hunting-boots and spurs, he had seemed to embody all the gallant spirit of chivalry. The little girl fancied that the heroes of Sir Walter Scott's delightful stories must have ridden just such horses, and had the same air of perfect physical strength and pleasant courtesy about them. Elizabeth, as a child, had never been fired with the idea of military glory; had never seen glittering uniforms, or been moved with a sense of passionate exhilaration at the sound of martial music; had never been overcome with the wonderful pathos of all that brave

show with its implied possibilities of horror, and agony, and death. So it happened that fox-hunting country gentlemen, commonplace easy-going people engaged merely in the pursuit of their own pleasure, represented to her the fine disregard of danger and indifference to bodily discomfort and hurt, that is so entirely captivating to most women's minds. It is the fashion nowadays to deprecate the poetry of broken bones as uncultivated and archaic; but, "higher education," board-schools, and certificates notwithstanding, most people are still ruled more by their instincts and feelings than by pure reason, or a delicate perception of artistic cause and effect. A man's voluntary disregard of danger still claims a woman's sincere admiration. The members of the softer sex have a latent element of savagery in them which makes many of them disposed, even in the nineteenth century, to rate brute courage above the cardinal virtues.

Thus Elizabeth was strongly influenced, in two very different ways, by her feeling for Mr. Mainwaring. Notwithstanding her admiration for the broader and more cultivated life which she knew her brother-in-law and all his friends lived, from early habit and association, Elizabeth was conscious of possessing a strange tenderness for men of her uncle's type; and she was never quite certain to which of these two very different orders of beings she really belonged.

Anyway, she did not criticise Mr. Mainwaring much; she asked herself no questions about him: but loved him simply, and as a natural result desired to please him.

CHAPTER V.

"Whilst yet the calm hours creep,
Dream thou—and from thy sleep
Then wake to weep."

IN the beginning of July the Rector left home for a week. He went to receive rents from, and listen to the complaints of, his tenants on a small property which he owned in another county. This expedition was of yearly occurrence, and was regarded as a grave event in the household. Mr. Mainwaring stayed at the house of his bailiff; taking Bunton with him, and thereby securing not only his own comfort, but many interesting subjects of conversation for the subsequent delectation of the servants' hall at Claybrooke,—as the worthy butler returned home with a budget of gossip and stories not unworthy of Scheherazade herself!

Mrs. Mainwaring, to whom the notion of a railway journey was always a little alarming, and whose devotion to her husband made her—after nearly forty years of married life—quite as unwilling to part from him for a week as she had been within six months of her wedding-day, announced, as usual, her intention of driving over with the Rector to

Slowby, and seeing him safely off by the three o'clock up train.

There was a great sense of movement in the usually quiet, well-regulated household. "The fine old English gentleman" is always remarkably full of business and importance on the day of even a short journey. He gives orders in a loud voice in the hall and passages; walks about with steps that resound through the house; is undecided about the number of pairs of boots he will require to take with him, and has a general air of severe preoccupation, as though urgent affairs of state weighed heavy on his spirit. Bunton, like all good servants, thought it right to adopt a touch of his master's manner and attitude of mind. He was as dignified and seriously solicitous over the packing of a couple of portmanteaus, as though he was on the eve of starting with Mr. Mainwaring on an exploring expedition into the heart of Africa. He intimated to the maids, several times, during the course of the morning that, though no doubt they might be said to have some place—a small one—in the general economy of things, yet they were but trivial creatures at best, and wholly unequal to great and solemn undertakings, such as that which he now had before him.

I fancy there is no class of men who take themselves, and their occupations and engagements, so entirely for granted as the old-fashioned English country gentleman, and the said gentleman's old-fashioned faithful man-servant. They do everything with a seriousness and an amount of conviction which is at once comic and impressive to the

Bohemian "dweller in tents," whose tendency is to smile at everything—himself, most of all. But though, to an emancipated mind, it may seem a little absurd that any class of persons should be possessed of such an earnest and sincere belief in themselves, it must be admitted that they have an amount of solid individual character which is too often wanting in more brilliant men. They are at one with nature, in fact,—though they have little enough imaginative appreciation of her beauties; and from that at-one-ness springs a strength and self-confidence which is rightly very powerful.

Elizabeth, when the travellers, with portmanteaus, sticks, whips, umbrellas, and all their various impedimenta—Mrs. Mainwaring included—had at last started for the station, went up to her own room.

It was a large low chamber in an angle of the house, with two long mullioned windows. One of these looked out to the west, across the broad pasture-lands, to the faint blue line of the distant horizon. The other looked south, over a foreground of brilliant flower-beds, to a thick bank of shrubbery and larch-trees, the tallest of which were delicately outlined against the sky. In this southern window —through which the sun now poured, filling the low room with mellow radiance—stood a writing-table. Elizabeth pushed it a little aside, to get the window clear; and after laying off her hot black dress, and putting on a white linen wrapper, she sat herself down comfortably in a big chintz-covered chair and prepared to give herself over to luxurious rest of body, at least, if not also of mind.

The old house was quiet, with the sleepy summer quiet which is so utterly restful and soothing. Now and then there was a footstep on the gravel in the garden below, or the comfortable rumble and squeak of a wheel-barrow, or the hushing sound of a broom, —nice careful noises, implying tidiness, and gentle labour, and a decent regard for appearances. The breeze came in laden with the scent of honeysuckle and jasmine through the wide open casements; and a bunch of tea roses, set in an old blue-and-white china jar on the table, added its delicate sweetness to the atmosphere of the room.

Elizabeth sank back into the deep arm-chair with a little sigh. The sunshiny stillness was very pleasant; all her surroundings were thoroughly comfortable, and eminently respectable; but, at one-and-twenty, stillness however sunshiny, comfort however solid, and respectability however obvious and undeniable, are hardly enough to yield entire content and satisfaction. At fifty or sixty, Elizabeth thought they might be sufficient. Then life would be pretty well over, and the shadows would be growing long, and a calm evening would be soothing after the busy day: but at her age it seemed sad to have nothing better to do than count the quiet hours growing into quiet days and weeks, while the Rector took his little journeys, and Mrs. Mainwaring mildly ruled her docile household, and paid dignified afternoon calls. At one-and-twenty, few handsome young women, with plenty of health and strength, busy brains, and unfulfilled desires, would care to settle down in a land "in which it seemed always afternoon."

Perhaps, on this particular day Elizabeth was all the more ready to resent her position and quarrel with her peaceful lot, because she had received some letters by the morning's post which had opened an unexpected prospect before her.

She had only had time to glance at them when they arrived, as Mr. Mainwaring's impending exodus had demanded her—as well as every one else's—complete attention: but now, in her own room, she hoped to give them her serious consideration, and arrive at some definite conclusion regarding their contents before Mrs. Mainwaring—who was sure to do a little composed shopping in Slowby—should get home, about half-past five o'clock, to tea.

The first letter was from Robert Lorimer's old lawyer, and dealt merely with a matter of business. In addition to an income of about a thousand a year, her husband had left to Elizabeth a house, in the rather uninteresting district of south-west London which stretches from around Victoria Station down towards the river. Robert Lorimer had taken this house on a long lease shortly before his marriage. The Frank Lorimers and various friends lived near by; and the young couple had settled down in their London home, with the expectation of spending many years in it. But in point of fact they spent barely one year there. Robert Lorimer's health broke down, as has already been stated; he and his wife were hurried abroad at very short notice, and the house was let. Now, the lawyer wrote to inform Elizabeth that the family, which had taken the house, wished to give it up when their

year expired in the coming September; and to ask whether she desired that he should put it into the hands of some house-agent with a view to securing another tenant, or whether she proposed occupying it herself.

The information and suggestion contained in this letter came upon Elizabeth with the force of a considerable surprise. She had been too confused and unhappy when she left London to trouble herself about business; and the matter of the letting of the house had entirely passed from her mind.

Her first feeling on reading this letter was one of shrinking. How could she go back and live alone in a place so full of memories and disappointments? She did not disguise from herself that her marriage had, in some ways, not been an entire success. It would be painful to be clearly reminded of all that it had not been, as well as of all that it had been. Both the sweet and bitter of memory would go to swell the stream of her regret.

But, on the other hand, the prospect of a long dreary winter in the cold damp midlands, when the roads would be too bad to admit of the interchange of the mildest of social civilities, and when the fields would be too muddy to walk over, was far from exhilarating. Mr. Mainwaring's chief employment, and, alas! his chief subject of conversation, would be hunting. For days and weeks Elizabeth would have no one to speak to but her aunt; and she was beginning to feel a little nervous at the idea of frequent *tête-à-têtes* with Mrs. Mainwaring. Even in the summer sunshine the old Rectory-house,

with its inmates and surroundings, was a trifle wearisome to her; what would it be, she wondered in cheerless December or January weather? She longed to live vividly. It was better even to suffer than to stagnate. Would the London house, haunted though it was by memories of her husband and her short married life—would it not, she thought, after all be preferable to the sameness and everlasting "afternoon" of her Claybrooke existence?

Elizabeth, lying back in the chintz-covered chair in her soft white wrapper, with the sweet scents wandering in through the open window, wondered and pondered and balanced these two views of the question, and found it almost impossible to arrive at any decision.

If her uncle had not been engaged with the unusual turmoil of preparation for a journey that morning, she would have consulted him, and probably some chance word or look of his would have touched the latent springs of tenderness and homely duty within her, and she would have stayed quietly at Claybrooke,—in which case her subsequent history would probably have been of a very simple and uneventful kind. But early in the day she had perceived that it was not a good opportunity for asking Mr. Mainwaring to apply a calm and judicial mind to the contemplation of her affairs; and so she found herself compelled to arrive at an unaided decision.

The more she thought the matter over, the more was Elizabeth disposed to entertain the idea of going up to London for the winter. She would give herself a little time anyway. She would not write at

once and say that she wished the house to be let. She would pause—perhaps to-morrow she should see more clearly what to do. Only she was sensible of an ever-growing desire to be free, to be her own mistress again. I am afraid it cannot be denied that my poor Elizabeth was egotistical, and looked at most things from the point of view of her own wishes: but strong natures are inevitably a good deal occupied with themselves and their own sensations. Let those who are wiser reckon them as fools if they will; and then proceed to suffer them gladly, being sure that they are pretty certain to find their own level in time.

The other letter was of a very different nature, and Elizabeth picked it up with a sense of relief after her mental struggle with the intricate question of the London house.

It was written in Mrs. Frank Lorimer's very neat little hand, adorned with many notes of admiration and much underlining, intended to point out and emphasise the writer's exact meaning in each sentence. But notwithstanding the exuberance of feeling that might be suggested by this style of caligraphy, and by the frequent use of superlatives, there was a force and clearness in the handwriting which implied that Mrs. Frank Lorimer, though of a lively disposition, was by no means in doubt as to her own intentions; that she knew her own mind and would have no hesitation in speaking it, when it might suit her purpose to do so.

"Dearest and sweetest Elizabeth," the letter began, "I have been in a state of absolute distrac-

tion at not being able to write to you for so long: but all my time has been taken up with the babies. Imagine, they caught the measles from some horrid children their nurse let them play with in the square, unknown to me! Of course I was furious. Other people's children have no right to give my children measles. However, fortunately, they were not at all seriously ill; only, poor darlings, more cross than I can say. They have been a pair of perfect little bears for the last month, and nurse and I have been at our wits' ends with them. Now they are getting all right again: but, as they still look wretchedly white and puled, I have decided to take them out of town at once. It is rather a nuisance in some ways, as I didn't mean to go away till the beginning of August, but that can't be helped. I have settled to go off next week to a nice, dull, healthy, little place on the coast of Normandy, where we spent two months last summer. It is ten miles from a railway, and quite charming,—when you get there! Frank will take us over, and then come back to his newspaper, and join us again later on.

"And now, my dearest Elizabeth, at last I come to Hecuba. The babies and their odious little tempers—pretty dears,—and their measles are only a prelude. Won't you come too?—Imagine how enchanted I should be to have you! And it would do you no end of good. I am sure, saving your presence, that you must be getting uncommonly bored at Claybrooke. Frank told me it was a lovely old house: but that the country was infinitely dismal, and that Mr. and Mrs. Mainwaring—please don't be

angry—were immensely impressive and stately,—he trembled before them,—but that respectability reigned to a truly alarming extent. My dear, I feel a little stifled when I think of you guarded by these proprietous and unimaginative dragons. For goodness' sake, Elizabeth, escape for a little while, and come and build sand castles with the babies and me in Normandy! We should have a lovely time.

"I can't promise you that we shall be quite alone. If Frank was to set up business at the North Pole, or in the moon, some of his adoring friends would turn up even there, I believe. But the friend in chief just now—a certain Mr. Fred Wharton—is the only one of the society who is booked to stay long. And he really is charming—plays delightfully, is by way of making enormous sums by his pictures, and will talk any amount of mild philosophy. He and I quarrel incessantly; but that gives a delicate point to existence, you know, and is rather agreeable than otherwise. Of course you will have a difficulty in escaping from the dragons—from what Frank told me, I feel sure they think us most dangerous and undesirable. But, my dear, never mind them, just take your courage in both hands and come. I shall be perfectly delighted to have you, and so will Frank—he is your most truly devoted admirer. We start on Thursday week. Now, Elizabeth, come, I entreat you. The babies send kisses.—Always your most affectionate,

"FANNY LORIMER."

Elizabeth could not help smiling at her sister-in-

law's remarkable volubility as she laid down the letter; and yet she was sensible of feeling a little annoyed. It is one thing to think slightly uncivil things of one's own relations, and quite another thing to have somebody else say them. Elizabeth had remarked, several times before this, that Mrs. Frank Lorimer's vivacity occasionally betrayed her into indiscretions. Elizabeth did not quite approve of the way in which she spoke of the Mainwarings, for it is never entirely agreeable to have an outsider put our secret thoughts into words, thereby generally showing us that the said thoughts are by no means wholly graceful and unselfish. Elizabeth was aware of a sudden movement of tenderness towards Claybrooke and her relations there, in consequence of Fanny Lorimer's strictures upon them.

It would undoubtedly be very pleasant to go off to the breezy French coast, and play with the two pretty, curly-headed, little children on the sea-shore, and listen to Mrs. Frank's amusing chatter, and talk mild philosophy to Frank and his society of friends: but the idea of going up to London for the winter commended itself more and more to her mind. And the thought of giving up this trip with the Lorimers for the sake of remaining with her aunt and uncle was a little salve to Elizabeth's conscience—which, she foresaw, might give her some trouble regarding her leaving Claybrooke for the winter.

The afternoon grew more and more hot and sultry, and Elizabeth's meditations, as she lay stretched out in the deep chair with her feet resting on the oak window-seat, grew more and more vague

and misty. At last her eyes closed, and she lost consciousness of her surroundings. She and Mrs. Mainwaring seemed to be building sand castles on the sea-shore: but the incoming tide always washed Elizabeth's castles away first. She built up one after another with desperate haste. It seemed that the whole happiness of her future depended on her castles outlasting Mrs. Mainwaring's: but the frothy salt water undermined one after another, and they sank away into the plain level of the wet sand. Elizabeth shifted her position uneasily once or twice, and then, settling into a more comfortable posture, slept on quietly, while the little gusts of wind tangled her brown hair into pretty confusion over her low forehead, and a soft blush came up into her cheeks, as into those of a sleeping child.

One of the many unamiable peculiarities of the climate of Midlandshire—stoutly denied, however, by the natives, who, one and all, maintain that if our climate is not precisely Italian, it is still thoroughly good and eminently bracing and healthy—is, that you rarely get a really clear sky for more than a few hours together.

During the morning, and even till the time that Mr. Mainwaring started for Slowby, the day had been radiantly bright: but as the afternoon wore on, a thin layer of white cloud wove itself, as usual, over the face of the sky, and the sun shone through it with a pale diffused light. At last, the breeze dropped, while the atmosphere became more and more oppressive; and heavy masses of reddish-white

cloud began to rise out of the south-east, obscuring the dim sunlight and threatening a storm.

Elizabeth slept on quietly for some time, and was awakened at last by a long growl of still distant thunder. She got up hastily, and, looking out of the window over the hot misty country, observed the unmistakable signs of an on-coming storm. The sky was becoming covered with rapidly-moving lurid clouds; quick irritable little winds ruffled the heavy foliage of the trees for a moment and then died suddenly away.

Elizabeth had that uneasy suspicion of approaching trouble and disaster which often oppresses persons of a sensitive organisation before the breaking of a bad storm. She remembered that Mrs. Mainwaring must just be driving along the exposed highroad from Slowby, and wished nervously that she was already home.

Partly to overcome her instinctive feeling of loneliness, and partly to ensure hearing the carriage directly it should stop at the front door, she set the door of her own room wide open on to the broad landing, at the farther end of which the main staircase of the house led down into the hall. Then coming back to her chair near the window, she sat down to watch the storm and listen for the arrival of the carriage.

Mrs. Mainwaring, Elizabeth knew, had an intense dislike of thunder, amounting almost to terror. She regarded a thunderstorm much as she might have regarded a revolution. It seemed to her a horrible subversion of the recognised order of things. It

surprised and confused her. She liked well-regulated nature, useful fields and trim hedgerows, lazily-flowing streams, well-kept roads, and nicely-laid-out gardens. Nature should be dominated by man and be educated by him, Mrs. Mainwaring thought. Mountains and forests seemed to her somewhat too disorganised to be contemplated with anything but a disturbed sense of astonishment. In the same way she appreciated moderate sunshine and convenient rains, with an orthodox allowance of frost and snow during the winter: but storms, and tempests, and droughts, alarmed and distressed her. They made everything seem so dreadfully insecure and doubtful. Poor Mrs. Mainwaring clung, with an almost painful tenacity, to that which is usual, and orderly, and well known. Everything violent and unexpected, whether in outward nature or in human emotion, was entirely bewildering and incomprehensible to her.

It was past five o'clock when Elizabeth at last heard the sound of carriage wheels and the opening of the front door. She hurried out on to the landing, while the thunder rolled and crackled overhead. Martha the housemaid,—who reigned below stairs in the temporary absence of Bunton,—was just saying, in answer to a faint inquiry of Mrs. Mainwaring, that Mrs. Lorimer was upstairs, she believed, in her own room.

CHAPTER VI.

"Virtue, how frail it is!
Friendship, how rare!
Love, how it sells poor bliss
For proud despair!
But we, though soon they fall,
Survive their joy, and all
Which ours we call."

ELIZABETH waited, a tall, glimmering, white figure, in the dusky gloom of the landing, while Mrs. Mainwaring—her small face pale with agitation—hurried upstairs, anxious to find repose and security after the turmoil of her stormy drive home. Like most women of a strong and ardent nature, Elizabeth was quickly moved to loving compassion by the sight of weak and timid creatures in distress. Mrs. Mainwaring, in the serene comfort of her daily life, was irritating to her: but Mrs. Mainwaring, tired, wan, and frightened, was a very touching and appealing spectacle.

"Ah! dear Aunt Susan, I'm sô glad you are home," she said, taking her aunt's hand and leading her gently into her own room, the door of which still stood open.

Mrs. Mainwaring turned to her with a clinging desire for support and encouragement. A thunder

storm, and Gerald on a railway journey, seemed to her a conjunction of alarming circumstances, which justified her in claiming all the tenderness and affection that she could possibly get hold of.

"Sit down," said Elizabeth, pushing the big arm-chair round into a shady angle of the room. "You won't see the lightning so much there; and let me take off your things; and let us have tea cosily up here, and then you'll feel all right again. I believe the worst of the storm is over now."

While she spoke, she busied herself in taking off Mrs. Mainwaring's bonnet and over-jacket, and in arranging the cap with white lappets, which she hastily fetched from her aunt's room. I imagine that when a middle-aged woman has once accepted the inevitable, and taken to caps, there is nothing more confusing and disturbing to her than being without one, even for a very few minutes.

Mrs. Mainwaring had often lamented privately that her niece's hands were not smaller. They were white and well-shaped, she admitted: but they had always appeared to her a little too large and strong for perfect womanly refinement. On this occasion, however, as Elizabeth adjusted the afore-mentioned cap, and smoothed down her gray hair with gentle reassuring touches, they seemed very lovely hands to Mrs. Mainwaring. She put out her arms with a sudden impulsive movement, and drawing the beautiful pitiful face of the young woman down towards her, kissed it with quite unwonted ardour.

"You are a dear, dear child, Elizabeth," she said

tenderly; "and it is very sweet to have you so kind to me."

Her voice was a little tremulous, and her eyes were full of tears. Mrs. Mainwaring had lost for a moment that proprietous self-command and calm dignity of demeanour, which—though very laudable in themselves—were certainly liable to keep most people at a very respectful distance from her. The two women had not felt so thoroughly at one for a long while. They had got away from all that is passing and superficial, into a region of simple and kindly sympathy. There was a delicate harmony between them, which both felt to be eminently refreshing after the discords and differences of the last few months.

"Poor Aunt Susan!" said Elizabeth, smiling as she looked down at the dainty, pretty, old lady. "You have been so frightened and agitated. I have been listening for the carriage for ever so long. Then you were driving that young chestnut horse, that Uncle Gerald wanted to try,—I was in a great fuss about it, because I thought very likely it would be troublesome."

"Yes," said Mrs. Mainwaring, "I was very nervous. William drives very well: but I never feel really safe without your uncle. I can't bear being alone. I had begged that we might try the chestnut some other day, but your uncle was in a hurry —he had given the orders, and I didn't like to worry him just when he was going away."

"Then the last bit of the Slowby road is so exposed," added Elizabeth.

"Oh yes! it was horrible. I don't approve, you know, of strong expressions, but it really was horrible. I am so thankful to be at home safe," continued Mrs. Mainwaring, with a little sigh of relief, while she softly patted Elizabeth's hand, which she still held.

The arrival of Martha with the tea created a diversion; and Elizabeth, having no more convenient place to set the tray on, cleared a space at one end of the writing-table, bundling her various books and papers into a heap at the other end, to make room for it. This arrangement was not altogether a tidy one, and consequently not altogether to Mrs. Mainwaring's taste. She could not help observing it with discomfort—all disorder was painful to her—but she forbore to make any open comment.

On the top of the other papers, conspicuous both from its shape and colour, lay the lawyer's letter that Elizabeth had lately been reading. It lay open rather courting notice; and Mrs. Mainwaring's attention, as she sat waiting passively for her cup of tea, was easily won. She could not help noticing that it was a business letter, and she began wondering vaguely what it contained. At another time, she would have disdained to appear to take any unasked-for interest in a private matter of her niece's; it would have been almost impossible to her to put questions about it: but her recent fright, and present sense of returning comfort and security, had somewhat relaxed her moral fibre, so to speak. She felt idly fascinated by the open letter; her eyes wandered towards it repeatedly, as Elizabeth poured out and

handed her her tea,—chatting all the while about the storm, which still rolled overhead, about Mr. Mainwaring's journey, about the road from Slowby, and the young chestnut horse. Mrs. Mainwaring was aware of a growing desire to know what business the letter could refer to; and became more and more disposed, as she drank a second excellent and reassuring cup of tea, and began to feel quite secure of herself and at her ease again, to ask some direct question concerning it. Poor lady, her recent adventures and emotions had shaken her out of the safe little rut along which she generally travelled; and now that she was recovering her footing, her state of mind was one in which she was liable to make unfortunate excursions in various directions!

As Mrs. Mainwaring finished her second cup of tea, the temptation became altogether too strong to be any longer resisted. Elizabeth's thoughts had wandered away to the Frank Lorimers' proposal. She was just remembering how she had fallen asleep after reading her sister-in-law's letter, and recalling her uncomfortable dream about Mrs. Mainwaring and the sand castles, when that lady suddenly spoke. Elizabeth was roused immediately from her reverie; there seemed to be some subtle connection between her own thoughts and her aunt's unexpected question.

"Is that a letter from your lawyer, Elizabeth?" asked Mrs. Mainwaring.

She felt rather glad that she was sitting in the dark, for she was aware that she flushed a little, and she wished to appear perfectly easy and composed.

"Yes," answered Elizabeth.

She was sorry, somehow, that her aunt had asked her; and, but for the softening influences of their late meeting, and of Mrs. Mainwaring's loving kiss, which still lingered pleasantly with her, she would probably have contented herself with that laconic reply. Just now, however, she felt but slight temptation to be ungracious towards her aunt, even though she did ask uncalled-for questions,—it is wonderfully soothing and agreeable to be at peace with other people. So after a moment's pause, Elizabeth continued—

"It is from Mr. Pimbury, about the house we had in London. It seems that the present tenant gives it up in September."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Mainwaring,—tea and darkness made her brave; she began to think she had quite a right to know a little more of this matter. "Did you expect that it would be given up so soon?"

"No," said Elizabeth, turning her face away, and looking sadly out of the window at the dull stormy sky. "I didn't remember on what terms the house was let. I was thinking of very different things just at the time the arrangement was made, you know, Aunt Susan."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Mainwaring hastily: but she had no disposition to let the conversation drop.

Elizabeth felt a little worried; she had not any desire to enter fully into this question, and to hint at her own half-formed plans. At the same time she wanted to be amiable; and she had a conscious-

ness, too, that Mrs. Mainwaring was sitting still there merely waiting for further communications. It is never pleasant to have information silently extracted from one.

"The letter only came to-day," said Elizabeth at last, turning towards her aunt. "I should have spoken to Uncle Gerald about it: but he was so busy this morning that I didn't like to bother him with it."

"Yes?" answered Mrs. Mainwaring; but with more of inquiry than of mere assent in her tone.

The good lady was quite alert now. All the limpness of half an hour ago had gone out of her. She was refreshed by tea and by sitting still in a safe place; the thunder, too, was slowly dying away in the far distance, which was decidedly encouraging to her spirits. She was beginning to feel a little irritated at Elizabeth's want of communicativeness: but her moral fibre was no longer relaxed, and, though she wanted more than ever to know all about the matter, she had regained sufficient self-control to be determined to ask no more direct questions.

There was rather a long pause. Elizabeth was stationed between the two windows, so that the light was concentrated about her white figure. She sat resting one elbow on the corner of the writing-table, and was apparently deeply engaged in the not very intellectual employment of balancing her tea-spoon on the edge of her cup. It was the sort of thing Mrs. Mainwaring could not manage to be unconscious of. She hated to see things put to wrong

uses. Somehow the delicate sympathy which had subsisted, a little while before, between the two women seemed to be growing fainter and fainter, and to be losing itself in the light of common day. Each of them, from different causes, felt a trifle annoyed with the other. At last the Elizabeth's spoon slipped with a little flop and splash into her cup. It seemed, somehow, to bring her to a sudden decision, for she looked up and spoke again.

"Mr. Pimbury wants to know whether I wish to have the house let again at once, or keep it in my own hands."

"There cannot be any doubt as to your answer, my dear," Mrs. Mainwaring remarked quietly, but a little incisively.

"Why? I don't quite understand you," answered Elizabeth, who, being conscious of her own growing desires in the matter, wished that her aunt did not think the question so perfectly obvious and simple.

"Of course you must let the house."

"I don't quite see why it should be of course," said Elizabeth, emphasising the last two words, and beginning to feel rather obstinate. "It really seems to me a matter that requires some little consideration."

"My dear, how can it?" replied Mrs. Mainwaring.

She sat up quite straight in her chair. The pink flush in her cheeks deepened. She looked at Elizabeth with an air of surprise, not to say consternation. It was very tiresome, Mrs. Mainwaring felt, that, just at the moment when everything seemed to be going so pleasantly and smoothly, this apple of discord

should drop down between them: but the proprieties were reasserting their usual sway over her, and she felt bound to speak clearly and decidedly, however disagreeable it might be to do so.

"It would be quite impossible for you to live in London alone, you know; and there can be no object in the house standing empty," she said.

"I don't see that it would be at all impossible for me to spend the winter in London," answered Elizabeth. "I could let the house again for the season and come back here."

Mrs. Mainwaring leant a little forward in her dusky corner, and pressed the palms of her hands together rather nervously as they lay in her lap.

"But, my dear Elizabeth, don't you understand that a young woman of your age and position ought not to live by herself? It would appear so very strange; I don't know what people would say. I don't ask you to consider your uncle and me, or our feelings at your leaving us; I merely ask you to think for a moment how very strange this plan of yours must appear to every one. You must see at once that it is impossible. It couldn't be done," said Mrs. Mainwaring with considerable dignity and decision.

"But why couldn't it be done?" rejoined Elizabeth. The fact that her aunt treated the idea as utterly preposterous raised a strong spirit of opposition in her.

It is an unpleasing, but unfortunately a certain fact, that two people are never more likely to have a serious and bitter quarrel than just when they

are recovering from an attack of unusually expansive affection. The excitement produces a reaction, which, too frequently, is very dangerous.

"Of course I only want to go for a time, Aunt Susan," Elizabeth continued. "You know how glad I am to be with you and Uncle Gerald: but I should be very glad to spend a few months in London. And, after all, why is it so absurd for me to think of living alone? Lots of other women are obliged to do it."

"But you are not obliged to do it, my dear," said Mrs. Mainwaring. "Here is Claybrooke; here are your own relations; here is the home you have always been accustomed to. There is no reason for you to seek another. You are not in the position of a woman who is obliged to live alone; in your case—indeed—it would be obviously unbecoming."

"You speak altogether too strongly, Aunt Susan," said Elizabeth quickly, straightening herself up. "I am not in the habit of proposing to do things that are obviously unbecoming."

There was a pause. Mrs. Mainwaring was aware that she had made a false step. "I wish, and I intend," said Elizabeth, "to see something of my—of Robert's relations this year." She waited a moment to steady her voice, which was a little shaky, and then went on distinctly. "Fanny Lorimer tells me how much they want to see me. She asked me to go abroad with them this month. I don't care to do that just now: but I really must see something of them later on. They would be close to me in

London, and I should like to see them quietly in my own home. I should prefer that to staying with them for any length of time."

Mrs. Mainwaring looked down at her clasped hands and said softly—

"It would surely be unnecessary for you to do that, in any case."

"But I don't think so, you see," rejoined Elizabeth rather hotly. "And in this matter I really must follow my own judgment, Aunt Susan."

"I can't agree with you, my dear," said Mrs. Mainwaring with quiet persistence. "In a question like this, the opinion of those who are older and more experienced than you are,—of those who stand to you, as your uncle and I do, in the place of parents—their opinion, I must think, should be not only considered, but abided by."

"Uncle Gerald has not had an opportunity of giving his opinion yet," said Elizabeth.

"Well, then, in his absence, Elizabeth, I hold it to be my duty to speak quite plainly to you." Mrs. Mainwaring paused; she gathered up all her courage, and then said, "Understand that I entirely disapprove of this proposal—entirely."

Elizabeth stood up, and rested her hands on the back of her chair. She was growing a little excited, and sitting still was irksome to her. She would have been glad to avoid a scene with her aunt: but she felt strongly that if she wanted to secure her independence, it was a case of "now or never." Also she believed that Mrs. Mainwaring's social objection to the Frank Lorimers was at the bottom

of her strong opposition to this London scheme. Elizabeth was almost fiercely determined to stand by her husband's relations. Her very doubt as to her entire devotion to Robert Lorimer made her desperately anxious to pay all due honour to his people. And, at this moment, her desire for a larger and more vivid sphere of life than that which Claybrooke offered her ranged itself alongside her loyalty to the dead, and made her ready to fight out the battle with poor little Mrs. Mainwaring to the bitter end.

"I must speak plainly too," she said. "The real truth is that you can't endure the Frank Lorimers,—you don't think them up to the mark,—you want me to drop them altogether."

"Pray, pray," cried Mrs. Mainwaring, with an agitated little wave of her hands, as though dismissing Robert Lorimer's tiresome relations to the remotest quarter of the globe, "Pray don't let us begin discussing that unfortunate subject."

"You want me to settle down," Elizabeth went on, with increasing warmth, ignoring the Frank Lorimers' dismissal, "as if nothing had happened,—as if there was no difference between what I am now and what I was as a girl. You want me just to miss out all the last few years,—except in the way of wearing black gowns. Don't you see, don't you understand, that it is impossible for me not to want to see Robert's relations? that I can't give up the past altogether?"

"You are quite wrong and mistaken," answered Mrs. Mainwaring quickly. "I have no wish that

you should not be different, — that you should not realise your situation. It is you, Elizabeth—I must say it—who seem to me to disregard your situation. Oh dear me!" cried the poor lady, in much agitation and distress, "don't you see that it is hardly decent—yes, really hardly decent for you to propose to settle in London, and go about and entertain people, when you have been only a few months a widow? Don't you see that it is absolutely wanting in proper respect for your husband's memory?

Elizabeth's face flamed scarlet. Now she did not care what she said. Every little unpleasant word that Mrs. Mainwaring had ever spoken, every worldly suggestion, every small act of repression, every want of comprehension of the position of others, every stupidity that her aunt had ever committed, rushed into Elizabeth's mind. Like most of us, she had an excellent memory for the faults of her near relations. All the bitter feelings she had nourished in secret against Mrs. Mainwaring filled her, and overflowed, pouring themselves forth in a torrent of excited words.

"How dare you say such a thing, Aunt Susan?" she cried. "How dare you accuse me of such a thing? You to speak to me of want of proper respect, when you are trying to make me give up Robert's own brother, and hold myself too fine to associate with him and his wife! What would *he* have cared for the sort of respect which consists in sitting upstairs with the blinds half down, and wearing loads of crape, and wondering whether this and that and the other person thinks you look unhappy

enough?—A very precious sort of respect that, consisting in clothes merely, and little trivial forms; a careful paying of the tithe of mint, and anise, and cummin, while the weightier matters—the love, and the justice, and gratitude, gratitude to his own brother, to his own flesh and blood—are forgotten and neglected! You don't understand me!" cried Elizabeth, "you never have understood me! You want to run me into your own little social mould, and have me for ever thinking what a set of stupid, ignorant, unimportant people are saying about me, instead of letting me be honest and faithful, as I want to be."

"You are cruel, you are very cruel, Elizabeth," said Mrs. Mainwaring slowly. She pressed her hand to her side, as if in actual physical pain.

"It is you, you that are cruel," answered Elizabeth passionately. "You who want to cramp and maim my poor life, and build it in on every side with miserable conventional usages. I want to live! Think! already, though I am so young, I have had troubles which you know nothing about,—I have had to bear disappointment, sorrow, and anguish. Haven't I suffered enough already, but that I must be thwarted and hedged in at every turn with these wretched worldly considerations?—that I must submit tamely to be bored almost to death?—that I must settle down, finally, at one-and-twenty, in the dullest of country neighbourhoods, without a hope or prospect in the future? Don't you see I long to gather up my life and begin again; to do something; to be interested in living? I am young and

strong; I can't make up my mind to stagnate here, wasting myself in useless regrets. You have your husband, Aunt Susan, and your home, and your life is full of what you like. But I—look," she said, spreading out her hands with a despairing gesture. "I have absolutely nothing. Surely you can get on perfectly well without me? Let me go, at all events for a time; let me see and know the world; let me live a little, and not rust here. Ah! life may be so full and beautiful for me somewhere else. Let me go,—you have no right to prevent me!"

Just then the clouds parted, and the glare of a stormy sunset filled all the room. Elizabeth's white dress, as she stood in the gaudy light, was stained with an angry orange glow. Shaken with her passion and with her own wild words, her brown hair disordered and her eyes flashing, she looked like the very spirit of the fierce and beautiful sunset, away there, down in the west.

Mrs. Mainwaring had risen too. She stood in the dim and dusky corner of the room, where Elizabeth had set the arm-chair for her with so much tender solicitude hardly an hour ago. Truly, only those whom we love can really torture us in this world. In that short hour, half the joy of poor Mrs. Mainwaring's heart had withered, and faded, and died. The child whom she had brought up, whom she had tried to persuade herself she loved as her very own, had turned upon her and shown her that there was a great gulf fixed between them—had plucked the very heart out of her poor, respectable, unimaginative life, and trampled it under strong, relentless, young

feet. Mrs. Mainwaring was filled with bitterness. She and Elizabeth could never be the same to each other again. There was a rent in their mutual love, which could only be patched, and never, it seemed to her, be mended wholly.

Mrs. Mainwaring felt very tired, she wanted to go away and be quiet somewhere: but she could not go without a parting word. She steadied herself for a moment, with one hand, on the arm of her chair; then she said, in a thin, hard voice—

"You are quite right, Elizabeth; I do not understand you. At this moment, I confess, I have no wish to understand you, for you seem to me to be in a singularly exaggerated and ill-regulated state of mind. We think very differently. I may be rather old-fashioned: but you are so painfully violent that it is quite useless for us to attempt to have any further conversation on this matter. While you remain at Claybrooke, I must ask you to treat me and my friends—whom you so greatly despise—with common courtesy and respect. And, for my part, you may rest assured," she added, "that I shall not interfere in any way with your plans and arrangements in future."

As she finished speaking, Mrs. Mainwaring moved out from her shadowy corner into the glare of the fierce sunlight. Elizabeth was shocked when she saw how pinched and aged she looked, as the light fell on her. Her heart smote her, and she came forward quickly.

"Ah! you are tired, you are ill, Aunt Susan," she said. "I have——"

But Mrs. Mainwaring put her sternly aside.

"I will begin at once to learn to do without you, Elizabeth," she answered, and went slowly out of the room.

Elizabeth flung herself down on the floor, in the midst of the lurid sunshine, and, resting her head on the hard window-seat, sobbed bitterly.

Pride and remorse struggled together within her. The picture of her past troubles, and of her present desolation, which she had called up by her own words, affected her profoundly. Everything seemed to have fallen short of her hopes and expectations; everything had yielded her less joy and satisfaction than she asked of it. Poor child! she had always desired so passionately to be happy; she had tried so hard to be happy. Her aunt had told her to be ladylike; her husband had told her to be good; her own heart told her always to be happy. And it told her so still. Still she longed and hungered and struggled; and still the phantom of happiness eluded and escaped her. She said, "Give me this one thing more, and I shall be happy." She got the one coveted thing, and found that the old longing and unrest clung to her yet. Sometimes it made her hard, selfish, and inconsiderate, as she knew she had been to-day. She hated herself, and yet craved, all the same, for the thing which seemed as though it might possibly bring her happiness. Good and evil are most subtly mixed up in us; the wheat and the tares flourish only too well close side by side. Elizabeth was generous and selfish, cruel and tender-hearted, all at the same time. She needed

many a lesson yet from the hard and steady teacher —Experience; whose teaching, though slow, is so absolutely and awfully conclusive at last.

The dinner-bell rang while she was still crying her heart out in the dying sunshine, with her sweet face pressed down on the window-seat. A minute or two later Martha knocked at the door. Elizabeth jumped up hastily, and stood with her back to the light, so as, if possible, to hide the signs of her late agitation from that worthy woman's eyes. She felt that it would be impossible to go downstairs and talk good little commonplace talk to her aunt over her dinner for Martha-and-propriety's sake; so she sent word that she had a bad headache, and wanted to be quiet. And Mrs. Mainwaring—who, from pure habit, would have sat down to dinner at seven o'clock if all the world had been coming to an end at half-past eight,—found herself obliged to take her evening meal in melancholy silence and solitude.

Poets and lovers, and other persons of an excitable habit of mind, have a pretty fiction that Nature laughs over their joys, and weeps with them in all their griefs: but, to a calm observer, this seems to be rather an optimist view of the matter. The two women, who, in that pleasant, quiet, old Rectory-house, should have stood to each other in the gentle and beautiful relation of mother and daughter, lay awake far into the summer night, each in her own chamber alone:—Elizabeth, with passionate tears, asking why the husband who might have guided, trained, and saved her was taken from her side so soon:—and Mrs. Mainwaring, with the cruel, dry-

eyed sorrow of age, asking bitterly, as she had asked many times these thirty years, why God had seen fit to deny her the sacred joys of motherhood, for which she had so ardently prayed and yearned. Yet the night was serene and cloudless. The stars shone peacefully out of the deep, purple, summer sky. The pastures spread fresh and sweet under the soft breeze. And in the morning the sun arose, rejoicing like a giant to run his course. The night was as solemnly glad and the morning as radiantly gay, as though no poor human hearts were torn with painful struggle and contending, and burdened with the deadly weight of love grown cold.

CHAPTER VII.

"Nurse no extravagant hope."

THE week during which the Rector was away was a very wretched one at Claybrooke. Mrs. Mainwaring wrapped herself in a garment of cold and rigid civility—fortunately for her there were no more thunder-storms;—and Elizabeth, alternately wrathful and penitent, spent a good many hours in her own room writing letters to Mr. Pimbury and tearing them up again.

She was compelled to answer Mrs. Frank Lorimer's letter without delay, so she wrote a short and rather irritable note, saying that Normandy was out of the question for her at present; holding out vague hopes of a meeting in London in the autumn; and bestowing so few words on the babies and their ailments, that her sister-in-law, who always had a lively inclination to read between the lines, immediately arrived at the conclusion that "the old Mainwarings"—as she irreverently called them in familiar conversation with her husband—"must have been perfectly odious; and that Elizabeth must have suffered such a martyrdom at their hands, that she had no sympathy left, poor dear, to expend on anybody but herself."

People are strong, one sometimes fears, in proportion to their limitations. Mrs. Mainwaring, in virtue of her limited imagination, had a remarkable power of maintaining a fixed attitude of mind and of manner. Elizabeth's feelings, on the contrary, fluctuated a good deal. More than once, a word from her aunt would even now have opened the floodgates of repentance, and she would have humbled herself and asked pardon: but Mrs. Mainwaring remained hopelessly the same. Every look and every word implied, delicately but surely, that she was outraged, astonished, greatly pained, utterly shocked; that she was well aware that she and Elizabeth were aunt and niece, and owed each other a certain consideration from that fact: but everything stopped there.—Mr. Mainwaring was coming home in a few days, he must speak the final word; meanwhile, she would stand by her colours, support the position she had taken up, and maintain a dignified and suggestive silence.

There is nothing more irritating than being in disgrace. A very few days of this state of things were enough to exhaust all Elizabeth's latent tenderness and harden her in rebellion; and two days before Mr. Mainwaring's return she wrote definitely to the lawyer, to inform him that she should take up her residence in London in September, and to request him, therefore, to take no further steps regarding the letting of her house.

Conversation under these unfortunate conditions was difficult; and the two ladies found time hang so heavily on their hands that they welcomed warmly

any little incident which broke in upon the monotonous round of half-silent breakfasts, luncheons, teas, and dinners. Mr. Leeper, the Vicar of Lowcote, who has already been mentioned in these pages, was not an object of great admiration either to Mrs. Mainwaring or to Elizabeth. It was rather surprising to observe in what a remarkably kindly spirit they both received him at this juncture, when he came one afternoon to pay a long-owed visit.

Mr. Leeper had given himself a day's holiday. Time was precious, he measured it out with a sparing hand—and having done one social duty by taking luncheon with the Harbages at Highthorne, he thought it well, as the day must it seemed be given over to trivialities, to walk on the five miles from there and pay this visit at Claybrooke Rectory. Mr. Harbage had started to walk with him, but the roads were dusty and the day extremely warm. Mr. Harbage was a portly man, of a soft lymphatic temperament,—moreover, he had partaken generously of a hot one-o'clock dinner, prepared with unusual delicacy and plenty in honour of the expected guest. By the time he reached the outskirts of Highthorne Parish, Mr. Harbage was aware that his courage was oozing out at every pore. He began to think it might be dangerous for a man, at his time of life, to take a long walk so soon after eating ; he had uncomfortable visions of sunstroke and apoplexy. Mrs. Harbage, who entertained hopes that her eldest daughter's undeniable abilities as an organist and district visitor might have made some impression on Mr. Leeper's mind, had suggested privately that this walk would

be an excellent opportunity for finding out how far that gentleman's heart was entangled by Louisa's useful—if not romantic—qualifications for the position of a clergyman's wife. But Mr. Harbage was altogether too hot for delicate diplomacy. He longed for his own study, slippers, and an old and easy coat, at this moment, far more than for any matrimonial advantages that might accrue to his eldest daughter. Therefore, he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten something very important; and bidding —with many protestations of regret—his younger and more vigorous companion a warm adieu, he turned homewards, walking erect and fast, to carry out the idea of urgent business, as long as there was any chance of Mr. Leeper turning back and seeing him. Then, after wiping his face several times and leaning for a while against a shady five-barred gate, he trudged slowly homewards, to baffle his wife's anxious inquiries concerning his conversation with their late guest, with as much ingenuity and as few equivocations as he might.

Mr. Leeper was a tall, thin, bilious-complexioned man, with a sparse black beard, and a rather high forehead which had a tendency to crumple itself up into irritable lines. He was almost distressingly energetic, and took real comfort in the thought of his mental and physical activity, and in the fact that he was a total abstainer. He believed that he possessed the original healthy mind in a healthy body. This belief gave him a certain inclination to sit upon his friends and acquaintances. He felt convinced that if every one would only take his

advice and follow his example, a sort of millennium of peace and plenty would immediately set in.

Mr. Leeper belonged to that section of English Churchmen which, not contented with trying to rule the Church, has a strong desire to rule the world as well. They dominate the life of their parishes in the most alarming way. Everything, from the Eastward Position to the state of the cottagers' pig-styes, seems to come within their province. As a rule, they are not greatly beloved. Poor Mr. Leeper was really a very admirable, pure-minded, and devoted man: but he made himself the measure of the universe, and, unfortunately, that measure seemed not to be entirely correct somewhere. He had cast up all social and religious problems according to it, over and over again: but though he felt sure he was right, the answer did not work out in universal peace and goodwill, as it so obviously ought to have done.

Mr. Leeper arrived, warm, energetic, and argumentative, at Claybrooke Rectory that afternoon, and was ushered into the cool shaded drawing-room, where Elizabeth Lorimer received him with unusual kindness of demeanour. Mr. Leeper rather prided himself on a stern indifference to his surroundings, but it was impossible for him not to be distinctly aware of the contrast between the bare dining-room at Highthorne, steaming with early dinner, the ill-dressed angular Miss Harbages, with their distressingly-anxious mother, and the pleasant repose of this stately old room, and quiet self-possession of the graceful young widow. Mr. Leeper tried to be

practical, and tell himself that fundamentally it was merely a difference of so many hundreds, or perhaps thousands, a year, and that the Harbages ought not to be blamed or Mrs. Lorimer admired for the difference: but, unfortunately, when one's eyes are pleased it is a little difficult to keep fundamental facts in view. Mr. Leeper could not help being rather gratified at his reception. He had no great respect for Mr. Mainwaring, but he began, charitably, to think it more than possible that this handsome serious-looking young lady might be considerably less darkened by prejudice, or wilful ignorance of important social and ecclesiastical questions, than her relations.

Elizabeth listened so graciously to his conversation that a sudden thought flashed into Mr. Leeper's mind. He knew that it was a little unworthy of his stern, somewhat ascetic, ideal of life, but still there it was. How would it be to convert and then take possession of this fair daughter of the Philistines, and use all the Philistine power and gold against the Philistines themselves? To use it for the furthering of the temperance cause and of diocesan conferences, the spread of sound Church teaching and the just administration of the poor law? The parish of Lowcote was too small by any means to exhaust Mr. Leeper's large stock of energy. This audacious idea, which had started all unbidden into his brain, seemed to him a very attractive outlet for much of his bottled-up force. As he sat talking to Elizabeth, enjoying the cool atmosphere and—though he would hardly have liked

to admit it—the sight of her sweet face, this idea gave to his manner just that touch of softness and respect in which it was generally wanting. He waxed eloquent concerning free and open sittings, the miserable condition of the cottages of some of the labouring poor at Lowcote, and the sorrow and degradation consequent on drink; till Elizabeth, who had only hailed his coming as a relief from her sense of discomfort and *ennui*, began to think him not only endurable, but really rather interesting; and Mrs. Mainwaring, though she knew it was high treason to agree with him, became willing to concede that his "motives might be good, though, poor young man, he was lamentably wrong-headed on some points, and not at all the sort of person she had always been accustomed to."

Life seemed full of possibilities to Mr. Leeper as he strode home that evening in the gloaming. He left practical matters alone for a while, and indulged himself with building a series of pleasing castles in the air. He saw himself on the highroad to a general making of the crooked straight, and of the rough places plain. He was more than ever confident in the certain arrival of a millennium, consequent on the unconditional acceptance of his views by the world at large.

But—alas for Mr. Leeper's visions of future triumph!—when he reached home, he found an angry letter from Mr. Adnitt, saying that his servants refused, in a body, to attend Lowcote Church, unless orders were distinctly given by the vicar that strangers were not to be put into their

pew. While Mr. Doughty, the principal bass in the choir—who, as he said himself, "had sung there, man and boy, this twenty years come next Easter" —was waiting in the study to announce, with more directness than urbanity, that "as Mr. Leeper thought his-self such an uncommon good musician and took people down so sharp at the practices, he might sing bass for his-self in future; as he —Mr. Doughty—wasn't going to stand up there to be spoke to before a lot of boys. He should go to chapel next Sunday, where folks knew when they'd got hold of a tidy singer, and behaved according."

Mr. Leeper's forehead crumpled itself up very much. His charming castles resolved themselves into the fine air out of which they were originally constructed. He gave up thinking of the conquest of the fair daughter of the Philistines for a time, and plunged wearily back into the actual.

But though vexation, and the sudden reaction from his unusually exalted state of feeling, caused him thus to put the idea aside for a while, he did not relinquish it altogether. He was sensible that there was a new element in his life.

At last Mr. Mainwaring came home, and the inmates of the Rectory were awakened from the state of torpor and discomfort in which they had existed since the evening of the thunderstorm. Nothing regarding Elizabeth's revolt was said on the night of his return. Indeed it would have been difficult to get time to make any announcement. Mr. Mainwaring was not usually a great talker: but

he kept up the pretty old-fashioned habit—falling sadly into disuse in these hurrying days—of telling his wife "all about it" when he came home from any little journey. What he had said, and what everybody else had said; what he had done willingly, and what he had been compelled to do unwillingly; repairs, gates, and fences; this man's beasts, and that man's sheep; what local magnates had called; what sort of dinners the bailiff's wife had prepared for him; how late the train was; how long he took going here and going there; finally, how glad he was to be at home again,—all these matters were retailed with simple cheery dignity as though highly important, and received by Mrs. Mainwaring with unwavering attention and appropriate remarks. It was a very real relief to both women to listen to this stream of unagitating talk after the silence and constraint of the last week. It was comfortable and reassuring to have the sound of a man's footstep about the house again, and to hear Mr. Mainwaring clear his throat in that loud unmitigated way so much affected by the English country gentleman.

Elizabeth was rather excited, and almost disposed to repent of her decided action regarding the London house. She regretted that she had not had an opportunity of talking the matter fairly over with her uncle; now she feared he would hear a very one-sided account of the business from her aunt. Having decided for herself, she felt it would be out of place for her to speak to him on the subject first; he must speak to her, and he could only do

so when Mrs. Mainwaring had put him in possession of the facts from her point of view.

Elizabeth had a large confidence in Mr. Mainwaring's charity and comprehension; she felt sure he would not judge her harshly or narrowly; still he would be pained, he must be pained, at learning her strongly expressed desire—and it would lose none of its force in her aunt's recital of it—to leave Claybrooke. Most likely Mrs. Mainwaring would have the whole matter out with her husband next morning; to-night she was evidently too happy at getting him back, and had too much respect for the time-honoured custom of "hearing all about it," to interrupt the harmony of the occasion by the introduction of jarring home matters. To-morrow poor Elizabeth felt she would be judged; she almost prayed that the verdict might be a merciful one. She had taken the responsibility upon herself: she intended to depart: but she earnestly desired to depart in peace,—at least with her Uncle Gerald.

CHAPTER VIII.

"We fell out, my wife and I,
Oh! we fell out, I know not why,
And kissed again with tears."

THERE had been a heavy shower of rain in the night, and the morning was hot, damp, and steamy, even on the high land where the village stood Down in the valley, and along the winding course of the brook, lay long lines of mist, which the sun, veiled by a layer of thin gray cloud, had not as yet sufficient power to burn up. It was one of those very quiet summer mornings when the damp earth smells sweet; and the cattle lie lazily down in the rich growing grass; and the birds keep up such a lively search over lawns and garden-beds for worms, that they have hardly time to sing.

Mr. Mainwaring stood on the flight of stone steps which led from the bow-window of his study down into the garden. He was smoking a comfortable after-breakfast cigar, and looking over the day's paper, which Bunton had just brought him. Mr. Mainwaring was in a particularly pleasant and serene attitude of mind. He was conscious of having done a good week's work, and of being glad to be at

home again. He felt a quiet satisfaction at being surrounded with familiar objects, and at being sure that there would be no peculiarities in the cooking of his dinner; he thoroughly appreciated the order and solid comfort of his own house after his short absence from home.

Billy and Boxer, the two fox-terriers, sat on the gravel walk just in front of him, in a trembling agony of repressed excitement; prepared, if their master showed the smallest disposition of quitting his present occupation and going for a stroll, first to spring into the air with frantic joy, and then rush madly after him and before him in any direction. Rufus, the brown retriever, lay on the steps in a state of absolute repose, occasionally turning a meditative and contemptuous eye upon the two anxious watchers below. He possessed all the dignified calmness of manner which belongs to an assured position in the world; while the fox-terriers were victims to the ill-regulated vivacity of youth, and to that excessive desire for notice which belongs both to dogs and men who are still on their promotion.

The blue smoke-wreaths from Mr. Mainwaring's cigar rose and floated out slowly on the heavy air. He felt thoroughly contented with himself, and at peace with all mankind—not the most violent speech of the most Radical member of the Government would have had power to irritate him greatly just then.

The inner door of the study opened gently. Mr. Mainwaring looked round with a smile; he recognised at once the quiet way in which his wife always opened and shut a door—without noise and without hurry.

"Well, Susie," he said, still smiling, and using, naturally enough in his present complacent state of mind, the old pet name by which he had called her in pleasant hours for so many years. "Well, Susie, what do you want?"

Mrs. Mainwaring was just a trifle nervous; she walked rather more rapidly than usual across the room to the open window, looking at her husband all the while with a timid suggestion of apology in her expression. She saw that he was happy and contented. She came as the bearer of evil tidings, and it grieved her.

"I am so sorry to interrupt you, Gerald," she said, laying a small dainty hand upon the arm of his rough shooting-coat: "but I have been sadly disturbed and distressed while you have been away. I had no opportunity of talking to you last night, but I'm afraid I must trouble you with it this morning."

"Dear me!" said the Rector, looking down at her, "what's the matter? Has Jones broken out in vestments all of a sudden?—or has there been a row with Evans about the widows' outdoor relief? That fellow Leeper's always making some bother at the Board, and trying to make Evans cut off a shilling here and a loaf there. If there was any chance of that man's having to go into the house himself some day, he'd look at the matter from a very much more merciful point of view, I suspect."

Mr. Mainwaring took a long pull at his cigar in rather a vindictive way, as if by so doing he hoped, in some mysterious manner, to reduce Mr. Leeper's

income so sensibly, that that obnoxious individual might speedily find himself in imminent danger of ending his days in the workhouse.

"It has nothing to do with Evans," answered Mrs. Mainwaring. In truth she found it very difficult, with her husband standing there unsuspicious of any serious trouble, to embark in her story.

"Johnson hasn't given warning, I hope?" said Mr. Mainwaring. "I spoke to him rather sharply, just before I went away, about leaving the carriage-drive in such a mess. He was surly, but I thought he'd have got over it by the time I came back."

"No; Johnson is just as civil and respectful as usual."

Mrs. Mainwaring sat down. There was a favourite arm-chair of the Rector's drawn into the window, and she felt that she could talk better sitting down. Her heart was beating fast, and it was a little trying to stand up.

"It is about Elizabeth, Gerald," she said, that I want to speak to you."

"Elizabeth?"

The Rector took his cigar out of his mouth, and let the newspaper drop to the ground,—thereby causing Billy and Boxer to jump at the wholly unwarrantable conclusion that he was going for a walk, and throwing them into a frightful state of agitation.

"Get down, dogs," he said, rather roughly, and then added, "Why, my dear, what in the world has Lizzie done?"

"Elizabeth hasn't done anything yet," replied Mrs. Mainwaring "But she proposes doing some-

thing which I am sure, Gerald, you will agree with me in thinking most undesirable."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Mainwaring, with a touch of surprise.

Gerald Mainwaring loved his wife very faithfully —too faithfully to stand aside from and criticise her. He would not permit himself to be clear-sighted regarding her. The boyish devotion with which, as a tall fine-looking lad, he had wooed and won pretty Susan Selford,—with her sweet pink-and-white face and little, clustering, auburn curls,—arose in him even now and blinded him to her faults, and weaknesses, and imperfections. Only when she laid hands on Elizabeth, who looked at him with the same clear gray eyes and spoke to him in the same full-toned voice, as the younger brother whom he lost years ago and mourned so deeply—then, and then only, did Gerald Mainwaring's loyalty relax a little, and did he allow himself to question, for a moment, the entire wisdom of his wife's thought and action.

Her husband's tone might have warned Mrs. Mainwaring that he was not prepared to be actively sympathetic: but the whole bitterness of the scene with her niece and of her own subsequent meditations, overwhelmed her as soon as she had fairly begun her narration. She went on with an almost painful insistence, and with very little perception of her listener's real state of mind.

"Elizabeth," she said, "is tired of Claybrooke already, Gerald. She told me so violently, and without any regard for my feelings. Her heart is set upon being a great deal with poor Mr. Lorimer's

relations, of whom, I'm sure, you have just the same opinion that I have myself—very respectable people perhaps for their position in life, but not at all the sort of companions we should choose for Elizabeth."

"Ah!" said the Rector. The thought of the Frank Lorimers was unpalatable to him; still he did not like to have Elizabeth blamed.

"She cannot be content with what we have to offer her here," Mrs. Mainwaring continued. "She told me very plainly that our neighbours bored her to death. She is full of all sorts of wild ideas about a larger life, great interests, and I don't know what besides. I should not have thought Elizabeth capable of using such very strong expressions as she did."

"And when did all this happen?" asked Mr. Mainwaring. He wanted to get hold of his facts before venturing into the slippery region of opinions.

"The day you went away. There was a thunderstorm, as I wrote you word, when I was driving back from Slowby. I arrived at home very much agitated —you know how I dislike thunder—and Elizabeth was most loving and gentle to me"—Mrs. Mainwaring paused. She had a painful choking sensation in her throat, just for a moment, but she mastered it and went on. "And then I most unfortunately asked some questions about a letter from her lawyer, and this terrible scene was the result."

"Well, and what does Elizabeth propose to do?" inquired Mr. Mainwaring, still anxious to possess himself of facts.

"Why, she declares she will go up and settle in London alone. Fancy, alone, Gerald, at her age!

—a mere girl like her. It is impossible—it would be absolutely scandalous if we allowed her to."

"But where does she mean to live?" asked the Rector.

"In the house poor Mr. Lorimer left her. Didn't I tell you the tenant gives it up in September? That was what her lawyer wrote about."

"Oh!" said Mr. Mainwaring slowly.

He began to see daylight now, but he wanted a few minutes to arrange his ideas before he spoke. He was still standing on the step just outside the open bow-window, and he turned and looked out over the lawn. Billy and Boxer had gone off in despair, and were doing a little independent rabbiting in the shrubbery on the left. The Rector could see their white bodies glancing in and out of the underwood as they ran hither and thither. He whistled to them once or twice; not because he in the least wanted them, but merely because he wanted to gain time.

Mrs. Mainwaring sat up stiffly in the arm-chair. She had not produced the effect she had intended to, and was feeling a little piqued at her husband's apparent indifference. Words did not come easily to her, and she was afraid she had given rather a lame account of the affair. She had hoped for instant justification and strong support—she did not despair of getting it even now: but it seemed to linger a good deal on the road, and meanwhile she felt somewhat sore and injured.

At last Mr. Mainwaring turned round. There was a strangely wistful look on his face, which be-

came his stern features wonderfully well. It was a look that Mrs. Mainwaring could remember long years ago. She thought he had looked like that sometimes when he used to say good-bye to her, after one of those happy days at Selford Hall, before they married.

He said quite quietly—

"I'm afraid we must let the child go, Susan."

"Gerald!" cried Mrs. Mainwaring, amazed and outraged beyond words.

"We've no right to keep her," he went on sadly, "just to please our own eyes with her grace and beauty. You and I are growing old, Susie, and this house is dull for her. The young love the young, you know—we did, and why shouldn't she? Of course she wants to get away and be with people of her own age."

Mr. Mainwaring looked out over the lawn again towards the shrubbery, but he did not see anything very clearly: there was a mist before his eyes.

For a minute or two neither spoke; then Mrs. Mainwaring asked coldly—

"But how is she to live alone?"

"Oh! I suppose she'll find servants as other people do. You'd better send Smart or Martha with her to help her manage at first."

This was just the last straw to poor Mrs. Mainwaring. That Elizabeth should go unpunished—nay, that she should be supported in her rebellion—was surely bad enough: but, as a climax, that she—Susan Mainwaring—should be ordered to give up one of her two favourite servants, to prevent this

young prodigal suffering in any degree from the result of her own rash actions, was intolerable and not to be endured. As soon as she was sufficiently recovered from the shock to be capable of speaking at all, Mrs. Mainwaring said, in a harsh deeply-displeased voice—

"You surprise me, Gerald. I did not expect this from you. It seems that I and the comfort of our household—everything, in fact, is to be sacrificed to Elizabeth's headstrong whims and fancies."

"I cannot see that we have any right to prevent her going," he said again. "I don't want to make you unhappy, or part you and Lizzie, God knows, Susan, but I can't see any other way out of this business."

"Oh that I only had a child of my own!" cried Mrs. Mainwaring suddenly, in her extreme distress. She pressed her hands passionately together, and her face grew pale and pinched with the excess of her emotion.

Mr. Mainwaring drew himself up to his full height, and an unpleasant straight line cut itself deep into his forehead, between his thick grisled eyebrows.

These two people very rarely mentioned the real sorrow of their lives to each other: but it was hardly ever absent from Mrs. Mainwaring's mind, all the same. The want, the disappointment, was always present with her, terrible, urgent, importunate. She tried to hide and conceal it, and only in moments of very strong feeling did she give voice to the sorrow that she always felt.

Mr. Mainwaring had desired a child as ardently as his wife. At this moment he would have given

his right hand to see a tall handsome boy, who would call him father, leap that sunk fence out of the meadow and swing across the smooth lawn to greet him. But men are much less impatient of the inevitable than women. Mr. Mainwaring had got accustomed to the fact of having no child. It was, speaking paradoxically, one of the very foundation stones of his life, utterly immovable. Nothing could alter the fact. He took it for granted; and it was only when his wife's bitter cry rang in his ears, as it did just now, that he realised clearly how great his loss was.

"The very tramp under the hedge has children, and why not I?" cried Mrs. Mainwaring again.

The Rector stepped inside the window: he laid his hand quietly on her shoulder.

"My darling," he said, "if you had had a child it might have caused you infinitely deeper sorrow than any you know now. Your heart is empty: but it might have been tortured and broken with agony of which, thank God, you know nothing."

He waited a moment, and then added:—

"We have each other, after all, Susie, and the memory of long, peaceful years to look back upon. And I hope—though we might have done more for this place—that still we have not lived here quite in vain, and that we shall leave things just a trifle better than we found them. Take comfort, dear heart; let the child go, and trust for the best in the future."

Mrs. Mainwaring stood up. Her heart melted within her.

"Gerald," she said very quietly, and, putting her arms round his neck, gave him a long, sighing kiss.

The first kiss of the youth and the maiden—he in the glory of his strength, and she in the glory of her beauty—is the very blossom of life, the inspiration of the poet, and makes the round world laugh with joy. But the kiss of man and wife, in the dusty afternoon of life, when the transport and illusion of youth are dead, after long years of disappointment, struggle, and hope grown tired in the stress and strain of daily living—the kiss of those two, pausing for a moment and turning to each other in faithful love, while the road stretches out before them, pale and misty, into the silence of the great unknown land—telling, as it does, of vanquished temptation and patient endurance, may well fill heaven itself and the clear-eyed passionless angels with a solemn gladness.

Mrs. Mainwaring's soul received comfort. She protested no longer; she would utter no complaint, though the most excellent of her maids was taken from her. She did not approve, but for love's dear sake she submitted. She would let Elizabeth Lorimer depart in peace.

When he was left alone, Mr. Mainwaring took a turn or two up and down the study. He had been deeply moved. For a moment he had seemed to look into the everlasting heart of things. It was a fine sensation undoubtedly: but the air on these extreme heights of feeling is too highly rarefied for ordinary human lungs to stand it long. The Rector felt he must descend to lower ground again

as soon as possible, and walk in common, comfortable, everyday paths. He shrank modestly from the thought of his own emotion, and wanted to get back to his usual level without delay. There was none of that unwholesome sentimentality about him which treasures up and caresses the remembrance of strong feeling, when the feeling itself has passed away. He went out on to the steps and drew a long breath of the sweet summer air; flung away the stump of his cigar, and, picking up the paper, tried to compose himself by glancing over the foreign telegrams, the weather forecast, and the state of the markets.

By this time the morning was pretty far advanced, and the sun had risen high, overcoming the clouds which had obscured it earlier, and burning up the mists which lingered about the valley. It was evidently going to be a roasting day.

The two terriers, tired with their excursion into the shrubbery, were lying panting on the gravel walk with their red tongues lolling out of their mouths. They were very hot, and yet they earnestly desired some fresh excitement, having, like most light-minded people, an unlimited swallow for sensation of any kind. The Rector was just settling down comfortably to the news from Constantinople, and the latest fight in the French Chamber, when a little incident occurred which satisfied the dogs' craving for diversion, and threatened to force Mr. Mainwaring back into the region of emotion from which he was just successfully escaping.

Elizabeth had roamed aimlessly about the house

for some time after breakfast. She fully expected a summons from her aunt or uncle, and listened rather anxiously for a call or for the ringing of the study bell; but the house was unusually quiet. She could hear the maids moving about in the upper rooms, and talking a little over their work. The warm air was filled with the drowsy hum of bees, which, attracted by the plants and cut flowers in the sitting-rooms, had wandered in through the wide open windows, and were now becoming a little worried and angry in their unsuccessful efforts to get out again. Elizabeth grew more and more nervous. It is horrible to know that people are discussing you and your conduct, especially when you have a lurking suspicion that it is possible to view both one and the other in a very unpleasant light. Elizabeth found that she could not fix her attention on anything; her thoughts would keep wandering away to the study, and to the little scene which was probably being enacted there. At last she picked up a book, and, taking her parasol, made her way out into the garden, hoping to attain there to that philosophic calm of mind which was obviously unattainable indoors.

She thought, after wandering about for a little while, that she would go to the Broad Walk, which at this time of day would be pleasantly shaded; and where, as the wind was in the west, she would benefit by all the breeze that might be stirring. To reach this cool retreat she had to cross the bottom of the lawn on to which the study windows opened.

Billy and Boxer seeing Elizabeth in the distance, as she walked slowly across the lawn, and thinking that she presented an excellent object on which to expend their superfluous energies,—and thinking also that she might possibly be coaxed into taking them for a walk,—made a simultaneous rush at her over the grass, and leapt up on her with excited and foolish delight.

Mr. Mainwaring, aware—even amid the fiery assertions and denunciations of the members of the French Chamber—that something had moved near him, looked up sharply, and, perceiving Elizabeth's predicament, shouted to the dogs and hurried across to her rescue.

He thought Elizabeth wonderfully pretty, as with a flushed face, half vexed and half laughing, she struggled with her book, and parasol, and the two irrepressible terriers, all at once.

"I wish you would teach your dogs to practise a little more self-control, Uncle Gerald," she said, looking up at him,—quite forgetting in the confusion of the moment that Mr. Mainwaring had, in all probability, just been hearing a very full and particular account of her sins. "They have almost torn me to pieces, and made me so frightfully hot."

He did not answer, but applied himself to reducing the two delinquents, by a short and summary process, to a becoming state of humility and obedience. Then taking Elizabeth's book from her he walked silently beside her to the Broad Walk.

As she recovered from the flurry of the last few moments all her nervousness returned. Her uncle's

silence made her fear that he might have accepted Mrs. Mainwaring's account of their difference of opinion as literally true, and might put the worst construction on her action. She was afraid he thought her ungrateful and inconsiderate, indifferent not only to her relations' pleasure, but wanting—as Mrs. Mainwaring had told her—in proper respect to her husband's memory. If Mr. Mainwaring did think these things, then Elizabeth felt that she should be deeply ashamed, that she should lose her self-confidence, and be obliged to confess that she had made a most contemptible mistake.

Stung by a sharp sense of discomfort and self-distrust, Elizabeth stopped suddenly and glanced at Mr. Mainwaring, hoping to gather some information from the expression of his face. Their eyes met. Mr. Mainwaring looked at the beautiful young woman earnestly and sadly, for a moment, then he said—

"So you want to go away from us, Lizzie?"

The tone of her uncle's voice affected Elizabeth strongly: but she read in his face that he did not wholly condemn her, and immediately she desired to justify herself. She dug the point of her parasol rather nervously into the ground as she spoke, but she answered clearly and directly.

"I have several good reasons for wishing to go up to London this winter. I believe that I owe a certain duty to Robert's relations."

She paused a moment, and Mr. Mainwaring turned his head away. There was something very painful to him in the thought that this young

creature was a widow. It seemed so incongruous, so out of the reasonable course of things. He disliked to hear her make any direct allusion to her husband.

"I know Aunt Susan does not recognise any duty to them on my part, but I can't help that. I must judge for myself in some matters."

Elizabeth drew herself up a little proudly. She had regained her confidence in the justice of her own cause.

"Yes," said Mr. Mainwaring, speaking slowly, "so I have been telling your aunt. You want to see more of the world than you can in a quiet, out-of-the-way, country parsonage like this. It is quite natural. I don't blame you. You are still very young, and life is still full of promise to you. Everything here is old, and has very little promise in it—except the sure promise of decay," he added, half to himself, smiling rather sadly, and sticking out his under lip.

Elizabeth turned to him suddenly.

"I don't want to leave you," she said, with emphasis.

"Ah! but there's the rub, Lizzie," answered the Rector. "You see, unfortunately in this world we can't take a bit here and a bit there, just as we like. With a little trouble we can generally get the thing we want: but in the getting of it we are pretty sure to lose something else we care a good deal about too. It isn't pleasant, my dear, but like a good many other unpleasant things it's true."

Mr. Mainwaring spoke seriously, out of the ful-

ness of his own experience. Elizabeth stood gazing away to the far blue horizon, and wishing that Truth was of a less harsh and angular nature. That the law of all attainment should be sacrifice, —in some form or other,—seems rather hard at one-and-twenty.

"So, my dear child," said Mr. Mainwaring more cheerfully, "see and know all that you can. Live in the thick of the stir and the turmoil. And then some day, perhaps, when you have grown a little sick and tired of it all—most people grow sick and tired at last—you may be glad to come back to poor, sleepy, old Claybrooke again."

Elizabeth might go, but she wanted more than just leave to do that. She wanted to feel sure that it was all right between her and her uncle. She laid her hand gently on his arm, and said simply, as she might have done when she was quite a little child—

"But you're sure you are not very angry with me, Uncle Gerald?"

"No, no," he answered quickly, looking at her with keen, kindly, gray eyes. "I have never been very angry with you in all your life, have I, Lizzie? Come now, that matter's settled and done with. We'll say no more about it, but go round to the stables and have a look at the horses."

CHAPTER IX.

"———remember, if you mean to please,
To press your point with modesty and ease."

IT would not be true to say that the energetic and active Vicar of Lowcote had actually fallen in love with Elizabeth Lorimer on the hot afternoon when, deserted half-way by worthy Mr. Harbage, he called alone at Claybrooke Rectory. Falling in love is altogether too poetical and fanciful a term to apply justly to Mr. Leeper's state of feeling. Yet when he recovered from the irritation into which his squire's letter, and Mr. Doughty's disposition to join a schismatic and heretical body, had thrown him, he began to think almost oftener than he wished of Mrs. Lorimer.

Of all things in the world, he loved power. He would use power for the best and highest ends, of course, but still the enjoyment of the mere possession of it was enormous to him. As he prepared severe sermons in his bleak uncomfortable study; as he went about his parish admonishing the backsliders, and giving rather grim consolation to the afflicted; even in church on Sunday,—Mr. Leeper could not help seeing visions of all he might gain,

of the extended sphere of influence he might possess, if—he really hardly liked to put the thought into words—he could marry Mrs. Lorimer! How far her personal charms influenced him, Mr. Leeper did not care to ask himself. He affected a certain asceticism of thought, which made him disinclined to admit that he was in any way moved by the fact that Mrs. Lorimer was a singularly handsome woman. He had never quite decided in his own mind whether celibacy was not, after all, the higher state. Certain expressions of St. Paul's, bearing apparently on the subject, troubled him a good deal; not to mention the very clearly expressed views of many of the Fathers.

Mr. Leeper believed he was working for a great Cause. He was a young man and spelt the word with a capital letter, though perhaps he would have found it a little difficult to define exactly what he meant by it. Any way, he was enthusiastically devoted to the unknown quantity represented by this word; and—so strangely do we, even the most earnest of us, deceive and mystify ourselves—he was prepared to persuade himself that there was a touch of noble self-sacrifice in giving up the honours of the celibate priest, if by marrying he could advance the opinions and reforms which he believed would be so beneficial both to the Church and people of England. Mr. Leeper must not be accused of being mercenary. It would not satisfy him merely to carry off the fair daughter of the Philistines. She must be converted too, and work as earnestly for the Cause as he did himself. Mr. Leeper had often

said rather sharp things about the excellent ladies of the clergy, and their undeniable power of setting their husbands and their husbands' parishioners by the ears. But Mr. Leeper did his best to forget his own accusations and statements now. Gradually he began to see that there might be a good deal, under certain circumstances, to be said for a married clergy. He was rather annoyed when he detected an inclination in himself towards this modification of his views: but still the thought of Mrs. Lorimer haunted him, and after a week or two he became very anxious to see her again. Heretofore, however, his visits to Claybrooke Rectory had resembled those of angels, at least in the particular of being "few, and far between;" and he did not see his way now to changing his custom and calling there frequently for no ostensible cause.

After the interview with her husband, Mrs. Mainwaring had taken up a new attitude with regard to Elizabeth's plans. She did not pretend to think it desirable that her niece should settle alone in London, and become a recognised member of the Frank Lorimers' dangerous and Bohemian set: but she exerted a severe self-control, and managed to abstain from any more open objections. She was supported by a very sincere wish to please Mr. Mainwaring, and by a comfortable sense that, for his sake, she was nobly enduring a mild form of martyrdom. The sacrifice of her own opinions was valuable, she felt, in proportion as it was painful. She would deny Gerald nothing; but it would be unreasonable to expect that she should forego a little secret self-

complacency when she remembered how much she was giving up to please him. Martha should go with Elizabeth—that, of course, was determined. It was the very crown and glory of her self-abnegation. And, when her niece protested against thus depriving her of a valued and trusted servant, Mrs. Mainwaring firmly intimated "that there were limits even to her powers of giving way:" that Elizabeth, being left in all other ways entire mistress of her own actions, must, in this one particular, respect the wishes of those who, "though they were perhaps behind the world, were still not entirely devoid of common sense." Metaphorically speaking, Mrs. Mainwaring regarded the worthy and excellent Martha in the light of the proverbial "coals of fire," and heaped her with much stern joy upon Elizabeth's devoted head.

Mrs. Mainwaring indulged, too, in another delicate form of revenge. She did not conceal the fact that she was terribly oppressed and worried by the thought of having to engage a fresh housemaid. She drew dismal pictures of dusty corners, of broken china, and of quarrels for precedence in the servants' hall. Smart, of course, did her best to deepen her mistress's melancholy. She had fought deadly battles with Martha, many times, during the years they had lived together: but now, in the face of her approaching departure, Smart saw her fellow-servant's virtues in the highest relief, and foretold ruin and disaster in the event of any change.

About three weeks after the Rector's return, Mrs. Mainwaring decided one day to drive over to Low-

cote and pour forth all her domestic griefs to Mrs. Adnitt, who had the reputation of being an admirable housewife, and who might possibly be able to recommend her some jewel of a housemaid.

Elizabeth was in a very submissive state of mind; she tried to conciliate Mrs. Mainwaring in all small ways, after having opposed her so vigorously in one large one. Of course she was willing to go to Lowcote, or anywhere else at that rate, when her aunt asked her.

Mr. Leeper happened to be standing just inside the doorway of one of the Lowcote cottages as the Claybrooke carriage rolled up the village street in a cloud of dust. He was delivering himself of rather strong expressions regarding the iniquity of parents who did not send their children regularly to school. His listener, a stout comfortable-looking woman,—to whose mind the advantages of a high standard of education had never presented themselves very forcibly—kept her eyes fixed on the open door, with a provoking and stolid indifference to her minister's fiery denunciations. Though apparently her attention was wholly absorbed in watching what was passing outside, she was really prepared, at the very first opportunity, to open a lively fire of querulous objections and excuses upon her unwelcome guest. Mr. Leeper heard the carriage go by, and involuntarily looked round. He caught sight of Elizabeth Lorimer's face, and, ending his peroration rather hastily, left the good woman with her mouth open just ready to begin her string of objections, and hurried up the village street in the direction in which the carriage had gone.

Lowcote House stands, like many of our Midlandshire houses, in a hollow, backed by woods. To the south the gardens and lawns stretch towards a broad piece of artificial water, where coots and moorhens swim busily about among the green lily-pads and floating weeds. Beyond are pastures with their herds of quiet cattle ; and plough-lands covered, at the time of which we are speaking, with yellow standing corn. Beyond, again, are line after line of blue hedgerows and round-headed elm-trees, broken here and there by the tall straight spire of a solitary poplar, and fading at last into the faint tender gray of the horizon—a common type of midland landscape, but pleasant, in sunny summer weather, with a suggestion of prosperity and repose.

Life would be very dull in the country unless we all prided ourselves a good deal on our own possessions ; and indulged in a wholesome contempt—not unmixed with envy sometimes—for the possessions of our neighbours. Mrs. Adnitt prided herself on the beauty of her flowers, the smoothness of her lawns, and on the wide stretch of her view. When you called on her, you were certain to be conveyed out into the garden—let the grass be as damp as it might—and were expected to fall into discreet ecstasies concerning the said lawns, flowers, and view. Mrs. Mainwaring and Elizabeth, of course, suffered this fate.

Mrs. Adnitt established herself and her guests in garden-chairs under a broad, spreading cedar-tree, and then plunged into the edifying question of housemaids.

Elizabeth tried to feel interested in housemaids, but her domestic instincts were not very strong, and the subject palled upon her after a while. She tried to amuse herself by watching the coots darting about among the green lily leaves on the pond: but there seemed no particular object in all their hurried fussy gyrations, and she felt a little provoked with so much cheerful alacrity all about nothing. In fact, Elizabeth was a good deal bored; and, for the second time during their acquaintance, she was far from displeased at the advent of Mr. Leeper, when that gentleman's tall, angular, black figure emerged from the house, and he came across the turf to the little group under the cedar-tree.

The two elder ladies were too much engrossed in their conversation to have any time to bestow upon the new-comer; it followed therefore that after a very few minutes Mr. Leeper found himself perfectly free to devote his undivided attention to Elizabeth Lorimer. He drew up a chair almost in front of her, and prepared to make the most of his unexpected opportunity.

Mr. Leeper was not naturally a diffident person, especially when he had some end which he wanted to gain in view. He was not at all in the habit of feeling any lack of self-confidence: but on this occasion he did feel slightly embarrassed. The garden-chair was low, and he was conscious that it forced him into a rather unbecoming position. He looked, in fact, very much like a diagram of right angles. It was Mr. Leeper's misfortune always to suggest to one's mind a problem in Euclid rather

than any satisfactory type of human beauty. He had been thinking so frequently during the last few weeks about the handsome, graceful young woman who sat opposite to him, that he could not help having a sort of nervous sense that she must be somewhat aware of his thoughts and plans concerning her. Then her very beauty was disturbing. Mr. Leeper began to fear that the world at large might hardly recognise his entire disinterestedness in sacrificing himself upon the altar of Hymen for the sake of the Cause. Still he did not swerve from his purpose. In truth, the purpose seemed to become more clear and distinct every moment. The glories of his promised millennium seemed to glow around him. The triumph of wisdom—his own opinion—over folly—other people's opinions—seemed beautifully sure and certain. But first he must try to convince and convert this charming woman. On the whole, he could not help fancying that she seemed a little glad to see him.

After a few preliminary observations about the weather and the crops,—two subjects which stand on the threshold of conversation, and must be overcome before an attempt upon more interesting themes is possible,—Mr. Leeper began to discourse ardently about those matters which lay so near his heart. He was most anxious to know how far his companion was of his way of thinking; how far there was a hope of imbuing her with a real enthusiasm for the Cause. He talked well about the questions he cared for; and now, inspired by the determination to impress and, if necessary, convert her, he became almost eloquent.

At last, Mrs. Adnitt and Mrs. Mainwaring, having, after much confabulation, pretty well exhausted the prolific subject of housemaids, rose from their chairs.

"We are going to the conservatory, Elizabeth," said Mrs. Mainwaring, turning to her niece. "Are you not coming with us?"

Elizabeth felt that the inquiry partook somewhat of the nature of a command. Her aunt evidently thought she had bestowed quite sufficient attention upon Mr. Leeper. But she was interested in the conversation, and felt no disposition to cut it short.

"I'll follow you in a minute or two, Aunt Susan," she answered, smiling at the two ladies. "I know how lovely Mrs. Adnitt's flowers always are."

Mrs. Mainwaring waited for a moment: but Elizabeth sat still,—so absolutely refusing to take her gentle hint that she had nothing left but to turn away with her hostess, leaving her niece and Mr. Leeper deep in conversation.

"I am very much interested in all you have been saying," said Elizabeth, as soon as they were alone. "I can quite imagine that these subjects might become very absorbing: but, for my own part, I am afraid I am too selfish and indolent to care very much about them."

She looked at Mr. Leeper as she spoke rather fixedly;—what a pity it was that his forehead went into such hard lines, and that his face had always a touch of vexation in its expression!

"You do yourself an injustice, believe me, Mrs. Lorimer," said he earnestly, leaning forward with his hands on his knees, and looking more rectangular

than ever. "You may have had disadvantages, you may have had no opportunity of studying these things: but if you once understood their immense importance you would, I am sure, take an active, practical interest in them. Think what a noble work,—assuring and consolidating the position of the Church, helping forward the cause of progress and morality among the masses! Ah," said Mr. Leeper, inspired with the magnitude of his own conceptions of future virtue and happiness, "these things are indeed worth giving one's life for!"

"Perhaps," said Elizabeth slowly.

"No, no, Mrs. Lorimer," he answered quickly; "it is no doubtful perhaps, it is a very distinct and absolute certainty. Remember," he added in a slightly professional tone,—"a time must come, to each one of us, when we shall hardly be careful to ask ourselves whether our past years have been easy and agreeable: but rather whether they have been as useful and admirable as it was possible for us to make them. The remembrance of solid work, of work accomplished and completed, will form our only lasting satisfaction in looking back."

There was something compelling in the strength of Mr. Leeper's personal conviction. It commanded Elizabeth's respect, and yet she had a lingering feeling that his ideal shut out much that is lovely, and precious, and worthy to be made room for in this world. Mr. Leeper's ideal seemed to her rather bare and commonplace, and wanting in poetry. There is nothing very romantic in well-ventilated drains, or in a substitution of lemonade for wine at dinner, I

am afraid :—and to certain natures even the thought of Church Congresses is devoid of any very keen dramatic interest. Mr. Leeper's ideal seemed to her of a painfully urgent, practical, business-like description. It suggested the notion of getting up so very early in the morning, and sitting down to dinner in walking boots to save time, and living in a condition of severe indifference to the graceful and leisurely side of things. Yet it was noble.

Elizabeth felt puzzled. She turned away and let her eyes wander over the quiet sunny landscape to the blue distance of the horizon. Her face was serious—almost sad, in its expression.

Mr. Leeper sat looking at her. He was aware that he had made an impression. And yet he found it very difficult to keep his mind steady to the Cause, just in this critical moment of possible success. He wished to be hard and ascetic ; but alas ! the pathetic beauty of this woman was more powerful than he had calculated for. Mr. Leeper would have rather liked to scourge himself, yet he could not help gazing still at Elizabeth.

At last she turned to him again, and said :—

"But I have known people work, and strive, and wear themselves out for these things, and yet, in the end, the result of all their labour seemed remarkably small, a mere drop in the ocean. They sacrificed themselves, and really it seemed, on the whole, to make no great difference."

"Ah," answered Mr. Leeper, "we must give the progressive movement time. In time everybody must come round to our point of view."

He drew himself up and summoned all his enthusiasm to his rescue.

"In time," he said, "every one must acknowledge the advantage of strongly restrictive measures regarding the liquor traffic; of a more thorough system of Church organisation; and of greater unity of purpose among the clergy themselves, to be arrived at by frequent meetings—diocesan synods, and so on. The country is not sufficiently educated in these ways yet; and there has been a lamentable degree of supineness among the clergy themselves till the last few years. But a better state of things is beginning. There is a growing spirit of devotion and earnestness among us, and I sincerely believe that the common-sense of the majority of the lay-world is on our side. I have no fear as to the ultimate success of our cause if we can get workers enough. The harvest is ripe, the call now is for the labourers."

Mr. Leeper paused a moment. Then he leant forward towards his fair companion, and tried to throw a tone of supplication and delicate appeal into his voice and manner. Unfortunately Mr. Leeper was always observed to be most successful in denunciation; his appeals were liable to appear slightly forced, and seldom produced a very satisfactory effect upon his auditors.

"We need the help of women, as well as of men, Mrs. Lorimer," he said. "In her most glorious and fruitful seasons the Church has always claimed the labour of her daughters, as well as that of her sons. In her great harvest-field there is room—nay, there

is a distinct and absolute need for the feminine as well as the masculine virtues. She can use the humility, the devotion, and that fondness for detail which is common to your sex, as well as the strenuous thought and persistent vigour which is the prerogative of ours. The priest is the authorised and recognised leader: but he must be supported, his work must be supplemented. In every diocese, and, on a smaller scale, in every parish, we want to establish a thoroughly adequate and well-adjusted organisation, in which man and woman, young and mature,"—Mr. Leeper paused a moment, and then went on with a little rush,—"married and single, will each and all find their proper place and proper sphere of usefulness.—Does not this appeal to your mind, Mrs. Lorimer? Do you not see what a grand opening there is here for all kinds of talents,—while each individual worker is upheld by the sympathy and concurrence of the whole body? Singly we are powerless, united we may successfully struggle with and subdue all the evils of our day."

Elizabeth sat still gazing into the distance, while the summer wind fanned her cheek, and the rich resinous odour of the cedars filled the warm air. Great ideas were very attractive to her. For a moment her own desires and disappointments seemed very small and unimportant. Would it not be better, she wondered, to give up all idea of personal happiness, and throw herself into this movement for the good of the Church and of the people?

The proverb says that one man's meat is another

man's poison. It is a slightly confusing fact. Elizabeth had been somewhat carried away by Mr. Leeper's address, when suddenly it struck her how very lightly her uncle would treat these schemes of Church government; how he would probably call Mr. Leeper a wind-bag, and his fine fancies so much impracticable and pernicious rubbish. The thought of Mr. Mainwaring's cheerful contempt caused Elizabeth a certain revulsion of feeling. She turned to Mr. Leeper—who, excited and warm with his own eloquence, was sitting bolt upright, with an expression on his face in which triumph struggled with anxiety.

"But think now of Claybrooke," she said. "My uncle, you know, cares very little for all these views. He is quite willing that things should go on in their old quiet fashion. I don't suppose anything would induce him to go to a Church Congress, or preach a crusade against poor old Davenport, who keeps the Red Horse; or to lead the very active life you have suggested. Yet his parish is orderly and well conducted, the people come to church regularly, and, as far as I can make out, we haven't half the squabbles and disagreements there that there seem to be in all the parishes round about. How do you account for that?"

Mr. Leeper had an unpleasant sensation,—a little as though he had been going downstairs, and had mistaken two steps for one. This speech brought him up with a nasty jar. He did not quite see how to answer it, with an accurate regard both for truth and for Mrs. Lorimer's feelings. It was a

regular woman's argument, he thought impatiently —personal affection, as usual, preventing a clear understanding of the matter in hand. He had just been making such a lot of room for the feminine virtues, and now the chief of them, unreasoning devotion, was getting sadly in his way. It was very trying to be put in such a situation. After a pause he said, rather shortly—

"Claybrooke is an exceptional case. The feudal feeling there is very strong still. I, personally, am too sincere a Liberal to admire feudal feeling; I think it begets servility and want of true manliness in the poor: but I cannot say that it may not sometimes be used for good ends. At Claybrooke this may be the case."

He felt a little unhappy when he had spoken; a little afraid that he was softening down the hard edges of truth for the sake of a pretty woman; a little afraid that he had been called upon to make a choice between Mrs. Lorimer and a clear conscience, and that he had chosen the former; a little afraid that he was not quite such a whole-hearted straightforward man as when he had stood in the cottage doorway, an hour before, scolding the woman for not sending her children to school. It is never pleasant to sink in one's own estimation. To a man of Mr. Leeper's order of mind, whose whole life's work is grounded upon a strong belief in his own infallibility, it is simply intolerable. He felt compelled to set his conscience at rest again. He turned to Elizabeth and spoke eagerly, desiring earnestly to win her to his opinions, and thereby

justify, in the end, his own momentary deflection from the strict path of virtue.

"I wish,"—he said, "I do wish most truly, Mrs. Lorimer, that I could persuade you to take a living interest in these matters."

Elizabeth felt almost annoyed by the insistence with which he spoke. Just then a servant came across from the house to announce that tea was ready indoors. Elizabeth rose, and Mr. Leeper, before turning to follow the messenger, spoke again.

"I wish it very much," he said. "Mrs. Lorimer, will you let me lend you some books and pamphlets which will put before you—much more clearly and forcibly than I can—the importance of these questions?"

"I'm afraid I shouldn't have time to read them now," she answered, wishing that he would not make the matter such a personal one.

"Then later, in the autumn," he insisted, "I will bring them over to Claybrooke. There is always plenty of time for reading during the long evenings."

"I shan't be here then," said Elizabeth.

They were walking across the lawn to the house.

Mr. Leeper stopped short and asked quite sharply, with a decided touch of his usual irritability—

"Why, where are you going?"

"To London," she answered; and added slowly, "I don't quite know when I shall come back."

She remembered Mr. Mainwaring's words—she would only come back when she had seen every-

thing and grown tired of everything. It seemed to Elizabeth, standing opposite to Mr. Leeper, with his vexed and anxious face, in the quiet sunny light of the summer afternoon, that it might be a very long time before that came to pass.

Mr. Leeper drank Mrs. Adnitt's excellent tea in silence, and devoured her perfect bread and butter without a word. He was intensely annoyed. All his plans seemed to be broken off short. His millennium had been coming on so nicely, and now everything seemed over. Mrs. Lorimer was going away, and—Mr. Leeper mentally had recourse to the scourge again—he did not quite like to think how very much he minded her going.

CHAPTER X.

"Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?"

THERE is always something not only painful but bewildering in going back after a lapse of time to a house one has known very intimately under other circumstances. It is haunted by dead and absent faces. And it is haunted, too, by an importunate past-self, which dogs one's footsteps, for ever crying reproachfully, "Why are you different? why are you no longer what you were? Which is the true and eternal, which is the false and passing self?" The past and the present struggle together, and it is difficult to reconcile them. One has a necessity upon one to justify the present to that importunate past; and yet, a wild yearning at times to take the latter to one's heart again, and bid the commonplace present begone. To a sensitive and imaginative nature this struggle becomes absolutely terrible.

The first few days that Elizabeth spent in London were very sad and weary and confusing. The coldness of Mrs. Mainwaring's farewell to her had been painful: but perhaps the kindness of the Rector's farewell had been even more so. Claybrooke, after all, was a very peaceful harbour of

refuge. Now she felt that she was faring forth on to the great ocean of life, to sink or swim as she might, with only her own courage and wit and persistence to guide her. She had set sail—like many another young soul—to search for an unknown good, and the first few days of the voyage were anything but encouraging. Elizabeth felt that if she had realised clearly beforehand how profoundly the return to this house would have affected her, she should certainly have stayed quietly at the Rectory, swallowed all her aunt's social nostrums, and submitted without a murmur to any amount of Midlandshire monotony. She was too prone, at all times, to take a mental review of her situation; to ask herself what she had accomplished so far, and what she intended to accomplish in the coming time? In the loneliness and silence of this familiar house, she became a perfect prey to melancholy meditations. Her thoughts centred upon herself and her present position, till she was overcome with morbid self-pity.

Outwardly everything was just as she had left it little more than a year before, when, in hurry and anxiety, she had packed away the things she valued most, and left the rooms swept and garnished for the incoming tenant. It was all just the same, only there were the traces of a year's wear and tear upon it, a year's freshness gone out of it. Elizabeth felt that she and her furniture had suffered the same fate. But alas! how much more tender human flesh and blood can suffer, how much more of its youth and freshness it can lose in a year's

time than these inanimate things can! There is something painful, and yet almost absurd, in comparing notes with one's own chairs and tables; and in observing how far more indifferent they are to the "ravages of time," than one is oneself. A meditation of this kind does not tend to an increase of personal vanity.

London was very empty still, and the Frank Lorimers were still abroad, so that there was no hope of any acquaintance looking in upon Elizabeth whose advent might relieve the tedium of her first week or two at home. Mrs. Frank—who had a remarkable power of deriving interest and amusement from other people's affairs—felt immensely sorry at not being on the spot to superintend her sister-in-law's settling in London. She was worried with the notion that Elizabeth would spend more money than was necessary, and longed to regulate all her domestic concerns. Mrs. Frank Lorimer loved a bargain—to do things in the very best way at the very smallest cost, seemed to her a perfect combination of duty and pleasure. She always wanted her money's worth. All her investments had been good so far. She was thoroughly satisfied with her husband, her children, her house, her servants, her friends, and perhaps—herself. She was a little afraid that Elizabeth was not altogether acute regarding investments. She had a lurking idea that people who were acute regarding investments were rarely widows at one-and-twenty, unless they had married for money, and then, of course, the case was materially altered. Mrs. Frank wished

very much that on this occasion she could have been at hand to overlook Elizabeth's affairs with advice, warning, and encouragement. However, since that was impossible, she wrote a much emphasised letter offering her sister-in-law all the help which the servants she had left at home could give; and dwelling, at some length, on her own and her husband's satisfaction at the thought that Elizabeth had successfully effected her escape from Claybrooke, and was really going to be their near neighbour in town.

On the third morning after her arrival poor Elizabeth came downstairs to breakfast feeling extremely wretched. She had found it impossible to sleep much. The house seemed intolerably hot and stuffy after the large rooms and passages of the old Rectory. She was depressed by a sense of loneliness. She had wished to be independent, and her independence was already terribly dreary. She asked herself what she meant to do;—was day after day to pass in this melancholy, aimless way? Was she going to remain in this state of torpor till the Frank Lorimers came back, and depend entirely on them for all future interest and employment? Elizabeth, as she sat in the bare dining-room, with the untasted breakfast on the table before her, actually failed so in courage that she felt disposed to own herself beaten, and go back to Claybrooke again. But her pride revolted against the idea. She put it from her angrily.

Roused from her lethargy by her own anger, seeing how desperate her situation must be if she had even for a moment contemplated such a step, she summoned all her energy, and determined to find

some simple occupation which should so engage her attention as not to leave her time for any more brooding. She must be busy all day, and not allow herself a moment for thought, if she meant to avoid the humiliation, and resist the temptation, of a sudden return to the Rectory. She could, at least, rearrange this house which looked so sad and empty. Perhaps when she had filled the rooms with china, and books, and nick-nacks, and all those innumerable odds and ends which are to a house just what ribbons, and frills, and laces, are to a woman's gown—unnecessary in fact, and yet all-important for effect;—perhaps when she had all these little things about her, the rooms would seem less silent and ghostly, and she would be better able to shake off the load of loneliness and sorrow which oppressed her.

Strengthened with this thought, Elizabeth, leaving her hardly-tasted breakfast, called Martha and went upstairs to her own room to examine the contents of some cupboards, in which she had put away her wedding-presents and other little household gods. Martha, having dusted china at Claybrooke herself, and scolded under-housemaids for not dusting it properly, for many years, and having, moreover, a disposition, like many good servants, to respect a mistress in proportion to the quantity and value of her goods, went, nothing loth, to assist at the unearthing of these stores of reputed treasures.

Elizabeth, when she opened the first cupboard, could not help feeling a childish sense of pleasure. She took the pretty things from their hiding-place —standing on a chair so as to get at the top shelves

—and handed them down to Martha, who, with various commendatory observations, wiped them and put them ready to carry downstairs. The windows of the bedroom were open, and the room was full of sunny light.

But Elizabeth had passed a sleepless night, and had hardly eaten anything that morning. Suddenly she felt herself turn sick and faint. The sight of all these foolish little bits of china, and wedding-gifts, became intolerable to her. They reminded her too strongly and vividly of the past. Each thing had its history—trivial and unimportant, and yet telling, with terrible clearness, of hours and days dead for ever, of change and loss, of unfulfilled hopes, and of past tenderness—that might have been little regarded at the moment—and could never never be repaid now. Elizabeth steadied herself with one hand on the shelf of the cupboard: but a tiny delicate cup she was holding in the other slipped from her grasp and fell shattered upon the floor.

"Oh dear, ma'am, it's broken!" cried the worthy Martha in a lamentable voice.

Elizabeth stepped down from the chair, and leaning her two hands for support on the back of it, said—

"I can't go on, Martha. It's dreadful."

"It is a sad pity you dropped it, ma'am," answered Martha. "It's broke past mending now. It's lucky it's not one of the best, though;—these blue ones, like the set Mrs. Mainwaring is so precious of, in the glass cupboard on the landing at home,—it would have been a real pity if you had broke one of them——"

"Oh, it isn't that," said Elizabeth, hardly knowing whether to laugh or to cry at the contrast between her own sensations and Martha's conception of them. "I don't care about breaking the cup;—it's the whole thing. It is dreadful being here. I wonder why I ever came."

"It is strange at first," answered Martha, with a slight glimmering of the situation. "But it will seem more natural after a bit, ma'am. Yes, it's broke past mending," she added to herself, as she stooped down to collect the scattered fragments of the poor little china cup.

Elizabeth stood still, leaning her hands on the back of the chair, her eyes fixed on the open window, and a far-away look on her face. She could see the gray houses on the other side of the street,—which were mostly shut up still, with closed blinds and shutters,—they looked singularly dull and unresponsive in the glare of the dusty morning sunshine. An organ was droning the airs from the last comic opera a little way off. Street cries, in tones once fresh but now strained and hoarse, rose now and again in pathetic cadence from the street below; while the confused muffled roar of the great thoroughfare leading down to Vauxhall Bridge formed a dull heavy bass to the nearer sounds. Elizabeth stood involuntarily listening. Everything seemed to her very sad, very trivial, very indifferent, very terrible at that moment. Life was far too vast and multitudinous and dark for her to try to comprehend it all. She could not understand why she was left alone like this with no one to train and help and

guide her. The strain of the last few days was telling upon her heavily. She seemed to suffer a moral and spiritual collapse, and to lose her hold upon all realities. Past, present, and future, were alike an enigma to her.

Martha, rising from her stooping posture with a slightly heated face, after collecting the fragments of the broken cup, gazed at her in alarm.

"Dear, dear, how white and ill you do look, ma'am!" she said hastily. "Shall I fetch you some wine or something?—how I wish Mrs. Smart was here to see to you; I never was a very good hand at nursing."

"Oh! I shall be all right in a minute," answered Elizabeth, sitting down wearily. "But I can't go on unpacking the china. You must do it yourself, please, Martha. I'm so tired. I'll go downstairs and be quiet."

She got up after a few minutes, and went down into the bare drawing-room: but it was impossible in her present frame of mind for Elizabeth to be quiet. Being quiet, meant sinking back into the state of morbid melancholy from which she had tried so hard to rouse herself at breakfast time. Being quiet, meant crying till she was utterly tired out, and then in despair deciding to own herself beaten, and going back to Claybrooke. Things had come to a crisis. Elizabeth felt she must make up her mind once and for all.

The atmosphere of the room seemed to stifle her; she went hastily and threw both the sash-windows on to the balcony up as high as they would go, letting

the fresh air, and all the confused stir and murmur of the street, in with a rush. Then she turned and walked up and down the two rooms, trying hard to master her sense of loneliness and indecision, and to regain her determination and self-confidence.

There was a little charcoal sketch of Robert Lorimer hanging in the back drawing-room. Just a slight sketch, but half finished; yet, like so many mere sketches, giving a much more living suggestion of the original than a more finished portrait. It had been done by one of Frank Lorimer's innumerable artist friends a few months before his brother's marriage. In the hurry of her departure a year before Elizabeth had left it behind hanging on the wall; and it was one of the first things that had greeted her when she returned to her own house. She had hardly dared to look at it, hardly dared to go into the room with it during the last three days. She fancied there would be something almost reproachful in the pictured face.

Now in her urgent walk Elizabeth stopped suddenly opposite to the sketch. She had arrived at a decision. She would neither relent nor give way any more; she would cast her sorrow behind her, and throw herself entirely upon the future. Elizabeth hardly knew how much she meant by this decision: but she had a vague conviction—notwithstanding the difficulties about Robert's relations—that her duty to her aunt and uncle and her duty to her husband were, in some strange way, linked together;—that in renouncing Claybrooke finally, she also repudiated the tenderness which she owed

to Robert Lorimer's memory. She was going to try to live a new life. She felt that she could not have her husband a silent witness of that attempt.

Elizabeth moved forward and took the sketch down from its place on the wall; and while she looked earnestly at it hot tears gathered in her eyes, blurring the outline, and making it hazy and indistinct.

In a sudden paroxysm of feeling—half penitent and half defiant—she raised the picture to her lips and kissed it passionately over and over again, crying—

"Oh, my darling! my darling! why did you die? why did you leave me alone?—you who loved me ——" She paused, and then added quietly—"Ah, indeed, why?"

Still the organ ran through the light airs from the opera, and the street cries sounded plaintive in the summer air, and the murmur of the busy thoroughfare came hoarse from the distance in through the widely open windows.

Elizabeth kissed the picture once more, very gently and reverently, as we kiss the dead when we bid them good-bye for ever; then kneeling down before her writing-table, she unlocked a little drawer, and laid it away, face downwards, in the narrow place. Rising, she locked the drawer again.

"That is done," she said softly.

She turned and walked thoughtfully to the open window, and stood for some minutes in the sunshine and fresh air.

There was something soothing and comforting to

her, after her burst of lonely passion, in the life of the dusty street. People moved by, on their business or pleasure, looking satisfied and commonplace. Life did not seem to be a mystery and death an enigma to them. They seemed to take it all for granted, without being troubled by any strange misgivings regarding themselves or anything else. Elizabeth, looking at them, felt herself growing quiet, growing conditioned again. Right or wrong, she felt strengthened and encouraged. She told herself she had done well to venture forth once more. The coming years might hold sweet compensation for her past sorrow. She would have courage. Just now, in the prime of her youthful beauty and enthusiasm, Elizabeth demanded to live largely rather than ideally. Self-renunciation seemed to her less beautiful than self-development; and she turned, once more, towards the future with an almost buoyant motion of hope.

When she moved away from the window, there was a new, very resolute, look on her handsome face.

She went out on to the stairs and called Martha; and when that worthy woman appeared in a lively state of agitation—foreseeing faintings and disaster—Elizabeth said to her in a clear voice, with no traces of her late weakness,—

"Bring down all that china, Martha, please, and I'll arrange it; and tell one of the maids to have a hansom here at half-past two. I shall want you to go out with me."

Then after a pause she added:—

"I don't like the house as it is. I want to go to

a decorator's this afternoon and make arrangements about its being done up. Thanks," in answer to some inquiries concerning her health, "I feel perfectly well now."

During the remainder of September and the first weeks of October, the house was given over to painters and paperers, notwithstanding the groans of the servants. Elizabeth wanted something to do, so she amused herself by gratifying every passing fancy in the matter of spindle-legged tables and chairs, rich heavy curtains, soft-coloured Indian carpets, inordinate mantel-shelf arrangements, and those strange combinations of colour which turn modern dwelling-houses into dark abodes full of mysterious suggestions of almost oppressive luxury. Fortunately Elizabeth had a fairly good balance at her banker's, for these transformations are pretty costly affairs: but even so, it did occur to her to wonder, once or twice, if she was not spending a good deal of money.

When the work-people at last departed, and Elizabeth surveyed her house, she felt a little like a child with a new box of toys. It really was all wonderfully harmonious and charming. But it is dull to play with a new box of toys all alone; and she still felt lonely enough at times and unhappy; and still the picture of Robert Lorimer lay, face downwards, in the writing-table drawer.

CHAPTER XI.

". . . En effet, ce qu'il y a de plus difficile à apprendre, c'est le genre de politesse qui n'est ni cérémonieux ni familier."

"My dear Elizabeth, it is perfectly delightful to see you again, and have you settled so near us," exclaimed Mrs. Frank Lorimer, coming, with a pleasant rustle of many-flounced garments, into Elizabeth's drawing-room one foggy afternoon towards the end of October.

Mrs. Frank took the stage admirably; her entrances and exits left nothing to be desired. She always looked equally neat and fresh; always equally mistress of herself and of the situation. Wherever she was she appeared to become, quite naturally, the centre of the system of things; everything revolved round her. She was more highly finished, both in looks and manner, than is usual with our countrywomen,—who too often have a tendency towards uncertainty of outline. I suppose it may be reckoned as one of the many unfortunate results of our misty, dingy, English climate, that English women are apt to be slightly indistinct. They frequently suggest the notion of persons moving about in the twilight, who are nervous lest they should be betrayed into

compromising mistakes by the semi-darkness around them. There is something agreeable, if a little startling, in meeting with a woman like Mrs. Frank Lorimer, in whose mind the brightest daylight always reigns, and who moves through life with admirable self-confidence, consequent on the clearness of her mental atmosphere.

She was a dainty little person, with a creamy-white complexion, large blue eyes,—rather too light in colour, perhaps,—and fair brown hair, arranged low on her forehead in soft waves. Her features were small and neat. Without having any claims to remarkable beauty, she was exceedingly pleasant to look at. There were no mysteries, surprises, or sudden illuminations about her; having seen her once, you had seen her always; she did not enchant you unexpectedly; on the other hand, she never disappointed you, but always produced the same effect of comfortable security and refined self-satisfaction.

On the whole, women liked Mrs. Frank Lorimer more than men did. They found her so capable and so supporting. A few of her acquaintances certainly accused her of taking up a little too much room and having too great a disposition to insert her pretty fingers into every pie: but then, who shall escape calumny altogether?

Mrs. Frank Lorimer was not only truly glad to see Elizabeth again, but she had a little bit of diplomacy on hand; and nothing raised her spirits and gave such a delicate zest to her intercourse with her fellow-creatures as the consciousness that it was

necessary for her to manage them, and do her best, gently and unobtrusively, to get her own way with them.

That morning at breakfast Frank Lorimer, to whose kindly and easy-going nature anything in the shape of a scene was utterly distasteful, had said to her, from behind his morning paper:—

"Fanny, you'll ask Elizabeth to dine here to-morrow night."

"Yes," she had answered somewhat abstractedly. She was deeply engaged in ministering to the wants of her eldest child, a slim, curly-headed, little girl of about three, who sat perched upon a high chair at the breakfast table; and whose behaviour, as soon as her hunger was satisfied, had become decidedly more cheerful than decorous.

"I think I'll ask Clement Bartlett or Wharton to dinner too," continued Frank, emerging from behind his paper again.

"Why?—My darling child, do remember to hold your spoon with your right hand.—The first time she comes, Frank, I should really think Elizabeth would prefer to be alone with us."

Frank Lorimer was feeling rather dismal and rather irritable. The memories of a very bad passage across the Channel, the day before, still haunted him. He was sensible that his play-time was over for this year, and that nine months of hard work stretched themselves out uninvitingly before him. He was very fond of Elizabeth, he admired her greatly: but he shrank from the idea of a pathetic interview with her, and desired to erect a barricade

of indifferent friends between himself and any unnecessary displays of emotion on her part.

"Well, you see, really, Fanny," he answered in a slightly depressed and grumbling tone, "the meeting must be rather painful any way. I haven't seen Elizabeth since February, and of course she'll feel coming here again. You can't be sure of Elizabeth, you know; and I hate to see a woman upset, it's so very unpleasant. I really think the meeting would go off better if somebody else was here too."

"Nini, darling, a little more milk? Don't spill it—there. Yes, perhaps it would be best," said Mrs. Frank meditatively. "Only, Frank, if we must have somebody, pray ask Mr. Wharton. Clement Bartlett was never very intelligent, and he is too utterly tiresome now that he has gone on to the stage. He talks the most unlimited shop. Young gentlemen always are a bore when they like their professions; they treat one to so much unnecessary information about them.—Oh! my good child," she cried suddenly, "what an awful mess!"

During the time that her mother had been occupied in commenting on poor Mr. Bartlett's shortcomings, Nini had indulged in a little experiment in landscape-gardening, by pouring half the contents of her mug on to the table-cloth. A shallow milky river, after meandering among the plates and forks and spoons, was now pouring cheerfully, in a miniature cascade, off the edge of the table and on to the little girl's white-pinafored lap.

"Quick, a napkin, Frank," cried his wife; "her frock will be utterly ruined."

While Frank assisted to dam up the river, and mop Nini's wet pinafore, he continued his little grumble.

"I'm sure Bartlett's a charming fellow, Fanny. You never have appreciated him. Women are so horribly prejudiced."

"There, that'll do, Frank, you're doing more harm than good now. I always dislike anybody I'm always being told to admire. It is only natural. —Now, Nini, be careful and don't make any more messes.—Very well, then, I'll ask Elizabeth to come; and Mr. Wharton is to come too. Shall I tell her that? Really, I'm afraid," she said, looking across at her husband, "it will seem rather odd. What shall I say?"

But Frank Lorimer, having gained his point, became quite ready to dismiss all further consideration of the matter in a light and airy manner.

"Oh, anything you like," he said. "You're far more ingenious than I am. Now, I must go.—Good-bye, you dirty little dear," he added, as he stooped down and kissed the little maiden in the high chair.

It was in consequence of this conversation that Mrs. Frank Lorimer arrived at Elizabeth's house, that afternoon, with a sense that she had a diplomatic mission to accomplish. She had quite settled in her own mind that, for everybody's comfort, there had better be as little allusion to the past as possible. She strongly objected herself to sorrow, misfortune, or death, and did her best to ignore their existence. So she decided to meet her sister-in-law in a cheerful and easy spirit.

"It is perfectly charming to see you again, and have you really settled near us," she said, as she kissed Elizabeth on both cheeks, holding her hands, and smiling at her in a composed and brilliant way.

"Now, my dear, I've only come in for five minutes. Yes, thanks, I will sit down here by the fire and warm my feet; I am frightfully cold. There, that's nice.—You dear creature," she continued, smiling at Elizabeth again, as soon as she had established herself comfortably, "you can't think how glad I am that you have come. I really am thankful you made up your mind to leave Claybrooke. You must have been nearly bored to death. How anybody ever manages to live in the country all the year round I, for my part, simply can't imagine.—Tea?—Yes, please, and plenty of sugar. Thanks, dear.—What lovely hands you have, Elizabeth!"

Elizabeth smiled too as she gave Mrs. Frank her cup of tea.

The two women were sitting in front of the fire, with a low tea-table between them—Mrs. Frank warming her feet, encased in a remarkably neat pair of French boots, on the stone fender.

Elizabeth was inclined to accuse her sister-in-law of being rather unsympathetic; at the same time she could not help being amused at her volubility. She had been almost entirely alone for the last six weeks, and felt somewhat out of the habit of talking herself. Conversation, too, in the neighbourhood of Claybrooke is wont to move forward with singular

deliberation—a sluggish, not a rapid stream, flowing slowly round large islands of silence, which seem to throw dense heavy shadows across its lazy waters. Mrs. Frank Lorimer's great determination of words to the mouth struck Elizabeth as really surprising, for the Claybrooke influences were strongly upon her still.

"We only got home last night," continued Mrs. Frank, sipping her tea complacently, "after such an indescribably detestable passage. Nurses, babies, everybody, even Frank himself, reduced to a state of limp misery, which—well, my dear, I'll leave it to your imagination. However, here we are, and we've had a lovely summer. And actually I left the children for a whole week, and went off to Paris alone with Frank. It was delightful. I thought I should have been miserable at being away from the children, you know. I ought certainly to have been entirely miserable: but, in point of fact, I wasn't. The maternal instinct went to sleep for a week, which was a mercy. Frank wanted to take me straight off to pictures and churches and all manner of things: but I retired to shop for some time first. I simply can't walk about Paris in English clothes. There's no real pleasure in life if you know you've too many or too few buttons on the back of your jacket. I'm dreadfully weak-minded, I want a lot of material support. If my clothes are not all right my mind won't work a bit. Existence becomes a nightmare.—Please, may I have some more bread and butter?—Thanks. But, my dear Elizabeth," she said suddenly, "how

perfectly lovely you've made this house! It's absolutely charming. I am consumed with envy. I shall feel broken-hearted when I see my own drawing-room again to-night—but, you know, I never seem to have any money to go in for this sort of thing."

Elizabeth could not help looking rather expressively at her sister-in-law's gown.

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Frank; "but it really wasn't expensive. I always bargain. Now just look," she added, standing up and turning her back on Elizabeth, "doesn't it fit divinely in the waist? And look at the hang of the skirt. I'm French," she said, turning round again suddenly, "from my bonnet to my boots; consequently I am utterly happy, and defy the universe. Ah, you dear, sweet, sober Elizabeth," she went on, laughing and catching hold of Elizabeth's hand—extended to save the tea-cup, which during these little gymnastics of Mrs. Frank's had been in imminent danger of spilling its contents all over the carpet and her gown, "you think me horribly trivial, don't you? Don't I bore you dreadfully?"

"No; on the contrary," answered Elizabeth, smiling, "I think you very clever; and you entertain me immensely."

"Ah, I'm thankful for that," said Mrs. Frank, subsiding into her chair again. "You must have been quite enough bored in the country without being bored here as well. Now do tell me," she added, bending forward and looking rather hard at Elizabeth with her large, innocent, blue eyes,

"weren't the Mainwarings tremendously annoyed at your coming away?"

"My aunt objected to it," answered Elizabeth, drawing herself up.

She did not quite like Fanny Lorimer's tone; and she felt that it would be impossible to make her comprehend the mixed feelings with which she regarded her relations at Claybrooke. Fanny Lorimer belonged to a different world: Elizabeth knew that she could not understand the Mainwarings. It seemed to be her fate, poor Elizabeth thought, always to defend absent relations from the sharp criticism of present ones.

"I fancy she does not regard us with at all favourable eyes, does she?" said Mrs. Frank, looking brightly in Elizabeth's face.

"She doesn't know you, Fanny; and she has strong——"

Elizabeth paused.

"Prejudices," said her sister-in-law. "Oh yes, I understand perfectly. She detests us, and was very angry at your coming, and wanted you to drop us altogether; and you defied her in an heroic way—charming, Elizabeth! And your uncle, you know, I want to know about him? Frank was immensely impressed with him, and gave me quite an excited account of his looks, and manner, and so on. But I don't by any means fancy Mr. Mainwaring returned all the admiration Frank kindly bestowed on him. I think I made that out."

"I am very fond of my uncle," said Elizabeth rather stiffly. "Perhaps I care for him more than for any one else."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Frank, with a little comprehensive nod.

She saw that she had touched on dangerous ground; but she was not easily abashed.

"Well now, you know, I came not only to welcome you, you dear creature, and to tell you how delighted I am that you've come, but to ask you to dine with us to-morrow. Frank's fearfully busy; he is longing to see you, but he has nothing but his evenings just now. He thought, perhaps, you would come and see him, as there is a difficulty about his coming to see you. Do dine with us to-morrow night. We shall only be four."

"Four?" inquired Elizabeth.

Mrs. Frank shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"Ah," she said, looking up at her hostess in a charmingly apologetic way, "you must make up your mind to the friends, Elizabeth; they are quite inevitable. Only Mr. Wharton is coming to dinner to-morrow, at seven o'clock,—did I tell you seven? He really is very pleasant and cultivated and musical. You won't mind him, will you?"

Elizabeth felt disappointed and vexed. She had looked forward to seeing Frank alone. It seemed to her strange that any outsider should be permitted to intrude upon them at their first meeting. Elizabeth was certainly rather inconsistent. She was too much disposed to ignore her circumstances herself, but she remarked any tendency to ignore them on the part of others with considerable irritation. Our faults are generally distasteful to us when we see them committed by another person.

However, as she could not reasonably object to meet Mr. Wharton, she answered, after a minute's consideration—

"Oh no, I shall not mind."

"That's all right," said Mrs. Frank Lorimer, getting up, settling down the waist of her dress with both hands, and then proceeding to button her gloves leisurely.

"To tell you the truth, Elizabeth," she continued slowly, without looking up, "Mr. Wharton is very desirous of seeing you. He hoped so much to have met you abroad with us. I wonder what he will say about you. He has views about everybody. I think he will say you are very original. I think you are very original myself, certainly. But," she added, turning towards Elizabeth, who was still sitting by the tea-table, with a slightly annoyed expression on her face, "do you know, you give me rather an uncomfortable impression, Elizabeth; you always have done so. I always feel as if there was a lot more behind; as if you would surprise us all very much some day,—go into a convent, or do something else very magnificent and slightly unpleasant."

Elizabeth got up hastily.

"Don't be so foolish, Fanny," she said. Sometimes she thought her sister-in-law went a good deal too far, and was decidedly wanting in delicate consideration for other people's individuality.

Elizabeth had none of her companion's easy self-assurance. Her pride and her natural sensibility shrank equally from such personal observations. The idea of Mr. Wharton or any other unknown

young man venturing to give an opinion about her, one way or the other, seemed an intolerable impertinence to her. Elizabeth was in a self-conscious and sensitive state of mind, owing partly to her loneliness and to the lingering influence of the uncomfortable circumstances under which she had left Claybrooke. It seemed hard, too, that while one set of relations accused her of being light-minded and indifferent, the other set should represent her as a sort of Hamlet in petticoats, who might be expected to indulge in all manner of strange vagaries.

Mrs. Frank Lorimer went on calmly buttoning her gloves. There was a good deal of intention in her talk as a rule, though she often seemed to speak at random. She generally contrived to say just what she wanted to say; and there always was something that she did want to say. When the last two buttons had been successfully fastened, she turned a perfectly amiable and innocent face upon Elizabeth, and said—

"Well then, you come to us to-morrow. That's delightful. Good-bye, my dear; it is most pleasant to have you here. And your house is hopelessly—quite hopelessly—lovely. Your taste is admirable, Elizabeth. Good-bye, again."

And she rustled off downstairs, seeming to take rather a large share of the general stock of vitality away with her—leaving Elizabeth a trifle worried and exhausted, with an unpleasant sense, too, that she was only on the edge of things, while Fanny Lorimer was in the very centre of them.

CHAPTER XII.

"All free spirits, mutually permitting one another the liberty of philosophising without any breach of friendship."

PERHAPS there is no position in the world so entirely pleasant, so free from care and anxiety, as that of a young man of about five-and-twenty, with some means, some talents, and no wife and family; who lives in "rooms," cultivates his artistic sympathies, and devotes himself exclusively to himself, and to the friends whom he delights to honour. The position is absolutely ideal in its freedom and serenity. No more serious misfortune ever seems to befall the lucky creature than a cold in the head, a romantic quarrel with a dear friend, or a temporary shortness of cash. Like the lilies of the field, he is innocent of toiling and spinning, and yet is clothed in a manner not unworthy of a well-bred modern Solomon. He partakes freely of the cream of life,—he is petted, he is welcome everywhere, he is exquisitely untroubled, and rejoices in an entire absence of duty and responsibility.

What wonder if we, who are older, less agile, whose clothes are selected for their lasting rather than their fashionable qualities; who are not uncon-

scious of the collar as we laboriously drag our well-filled family coach after us; who have, in fact, finished up all our small portion of cream long ago, and are confined to a pretty constant diet of the skim-milk of life,—what wonder if we, I say, contemplate these young favourites of circumstance with considerable feelings of envy? Domestic joys, the sacredness of home,—yes, we are quite conscious of the magnitude of these blessings: but I grieve to say there are moments when we would exchange them willingly —almost with alacrity—for that slim figure, bunch of Parma violets, well-cut coat, air of gentle resignation, and enchanting immunity from near relations!

Fred Wharton—towards whom Elizabeth Lorimer had conceived somewhat of a dislike, owing to the rather forcible manner in which her sister-in-law had pressed him upon her notice—belonged to the happy order of beings that we have tried to sketch above.

He was a very pleasant young gentleman, with a remarkable capacity for enjoying everything—himself included. He was a charming companion, and, though not actively or enthusiastically zealous in the service of his fellow-creatures, he had the delightful faculty, too often wanting in greater souls—in saints, and prophets, and reformers, and all those other admirable people whom we admire immensely at a distance, and canonise with sincere veneration when they are safely dead,—of never being in the way. He was never urgent, and never attempted to encroach on his neighbour's individuality. He had constructed a pretty little system of philosophy of his own; and instead, like most philosophers, of

spending all his time in compassing sea and land to make a few unwilling proselytes, he was satisfied with applying his system practically to his own life. He was so entirely convinced of the virtues and adequacy of his philosophy, that he was quite content to keep it to himself, not feeling that he required the support of agreement on the part of others to confirm his own faith in it and give his system stability.

Wharton was by way of being an artist. He had considerable talent; but his powers of application were not very highly developed. He really preferred contemplating his fellow-creatures from a standpoint of philosophic calm to any more practical occupation; and only worked earnestly when some particularly attractive subject presented itself to him, or when the state of his exchequer warned him that times of scarceness were not far off.

Wharton had a natural inclination to like most people. He had many comrades in many different grades of society. He had a strong belief that it was a little stupid to rest content with any one side of society, however agreeable or cultivated. He did not imagine that any one person, or set of persons, could satisfy the whole of his nature. So he selected many different friends, each of whom satisfied some one portion of it, believing that it is the highest wisdom to live in as many lives as possible.

At the same time, the very power of imagination, which enabled his friendships to rest on such a wide social basis, made some persons intolerable to him. There was a certain unworldliness or obstinacy—

call it which you will—about him which often caused him to sacrifice some obvious advantage to one of these unreasoning fits of repulsion and dislike. Frank Lorimer, who, out of regard for the necessities of a wife and children, had come to temper all personal feeling with a touch of worldly wisdom, often took his friend to task on this point.

"My dear fellow," he would say, "what on earth can it matter whether you like so-and-so or not? He is ready to give you fifteen or twenty guineas for a drawing of his wife—you want the money—she is a very pretty woman—and then they know everybody. And, after all, the poor man has really never done you any harm."

"It's no good," Wharton would reply hopelessly. "He rubs me the wrong way, and no number of guineas is worth the annoyance of having to know a person I don't like."

In fact, Wharton's urbanity was not quite universal yet. The consequence was that he was regarded by some people as rather an uncertain and fantastic young man, sadly wanting in that delicate perception of what might tend to his own social advancement, which is in itself so admirable, and so invariably commands the sincere respect of others.

I suppose everybody's sense of humour is more or less intermittent. Wharton's sense of humour was certainly defective where those whom he disliked were concerned. Otherwise, as he stood and contemplated things around him, he was sensible of extracting an immense amount of amusement from the show. No-

thing matters very much, after all. From a secure position people have managed to watch the progress of the bloodiest battles with considerable composure. Sometimes, for a moment, Wharton's cheerful indifference left him, and the underlying tragedy of life lay bare before him, confounding and appalling his spirit. But, as a rule he watched the strife serenely enough from his own safe and comfortable station, regarding even the painful incidents as so much excellent dramatic material. He was too busy noting every detail and each delicate effect of light and shadow, to be acutely distressed by the scene, however pathetic. A very lively interest often presents the same appearance to bystanders as positive hardness of heart. Wharton's heart was by no means hard, but he was too much engaged in receiving vivid mental impressions to have time for any great display of personal feeling.

Living so much with the Frank Lorimers as he did, Wharton could not fail to hear a good deal, from time to time, about a person as nearly connected with them as Elizabeth. Mrs. Frank was not in the habit of cultivating the virtue of reticence, unless she had some special private reason for so doing ; consequently Wharton was pretty well acquainted with Elizabeth's history. It struck him as picturesque. And he was by no means inclined to refuse Frank's invitation to meet her at dinner two days after the latter's return to London.

Indeed he accepted the invitation with a distinct sense of satisfaction. There were not very many people in town yet, and Wharton had not very

much either to do or to think about. It would be a pleasant occupation to try little experiments upon Mrs. Lorimer, and arrive at conclusions regarding her. Wharton had done this sort of thing frequently before, and it did not strike him as a hazardous proceeding. He took a purely artistic interest in women, regarding them as an important and rather agreeable element in the general constitution of things; in fact, as a sort of dramatic necessity. But it must be owned that the domestic side of life was rather at a discount with him. Falling in love would be horribly agitating, he thought; and marrying—the notion of spending the whole of your natural life in the constant companionship of one person—seemed indescribably tedious. He looked forward, therefore, to meeting Elizabeth much in the same spirit as he would have looked forward to the reading of a pleasant new novel. The prospect was an interesting one, but there was no touch of personal feeling in the interest it excited.

After thinking the matter over, Elizabeth had decided to lay all the blame of Mr. Wharton's presence to Fanny Lorimer's account. Fanny would be bored at making one of three; Frank would probably have preferred seeing her quietly alone, but Fanny no doubt had objected. Elizabeth was very fond of Frank, and managed generally to find excellent excuses for his little shortcomings. When she had recovered from her first feeling of irritation, too, she really was not sure whether it was not rather a relief to feel that some stranger would be at her brother-in-law's, whose presence would make

all intimate conversation impossible. Poor Elizabeth had decided to harden her heart against the past on the day that she laid away her husband's picture. Sometimes, fortunately for us, our nature is stronger than our will. Elizabeth had determined to do violence to her own best instincts: but the instincts were by no means dead, they stirred within her, and gave her a good deal of trouble at times.

Mrs. Frank Lorimer's little dinners were always charming. They were pretty, and they were excellent too. Mrs. Frank herself was always delightfully dressed, and she had the faculty—which belongs to some women—of keeping you continually aware, not merely of what she said, but of herself. You never forgot that you were in the company of a pretty young woman, whose self was more important than either the clothes she wore, or the words she said.

Elizabeth, who for so long had enjoyed no more lively or inspiring society than a sick-room or the somewhat bucolic neighbourhood of Claybrooke afforded, found herself expanding pleasantly in the intelligent and genial atmosphere of the Frank Lorimers' house. It was enjoyable to be with people of her own age, to feel that she might say what she liked without any fear of treading on forbidden ground. It was refreshing to listen to her companions' light gossip and easy criticism, to move in their sunshiny atmosphere. She had an uncomfortable sense now and then that Wharton watched her rather keenly, and tried to draw her out on one or two subjects. He did both very gracefully. But Elizabeth was inclined to resent any appearance of

interest on his part. She connected him with certain feelings of annoyance, and was disposed to find fault with him on the slightest provocation.

After dinner, when the little party had returned to the drawing-room, Wharton and Fanny Lorimer —who were standing together in front of the fire— had a pretty sharp skirmish over one of their mutual acquaintances.

"I simply can't understand why you all admire Clement Bartlett so much, Mr. Wharton," she said. "And I can't imagine anybody less fitted for the stage. Just think of his figure: he has such a remarkably bad way of moving."

"Why, my dear Mrs. Lorimer, his figure is just his strong point. Everybody admits that it will make him quite a reputation."

"Indeed! the public must be easily pleased," she answered. "Now, can you pretend to tell me that he won't be perfectly appalling in tights? or fleshings? Just think of the severe simplicity of fleshings! He is pretty, I admit, but that's a mere matter of colouring—he'll lose it very soon. Then he looks so foolish!"

"Poor Clement!" said Wharton reflectively. "Frank must be very fond of him."

"Oh, I'm not the least prejudiced against him," said Mrs. Frank quickly; "I am calm and unbiassed. I let my imagination play quite freely round the subject, which we know is the sure sign of high culture. It is you who are all prejudiced. You are all," she added, waving her firm, little, white hands comprehensively, "all utterly infatuated! That's my opinion."

"It's no good," said Frank, who had been standing near them, turning away and sauntering across the room towards Elizabeth, who was sitting on a broad lounge at right angles to the fireplace. "Fanny never will have the slightest mercy on poor dear Clement, and he really is the nicest, most innocent creature in the world."

Frank gathered up the tails of his evening coat in either hand, and subsided comfortably on to the seat by her side.

Elizabeth had been listening with some amusement to the conversation. She was leaning back lazily, with her shapely head thrown up and resting against the dusky red covering of the back of the lounge. As Frank sat down she turned her face towards him without otherwise shifting her easy graceful position, and gave him a quiet smile of welcome.

The evening had gone so brightly and pleasantly thus far, that Frank Lorimer had pretty well forgotten the feeling which had prompted him to beg his wife to let some outsider be present on this occasion. As Elizabeth smiled at him, her youthful beauty and the fact of her widowhood struck Frank as strangely at variance. He remembered her sweet face haggard with long night-watches, and strange with the dread of death and separation, during the days of weary waiting that he had spent with her only nine months ago. Instinctively he lowered his voice, and fell into a somewhat sentimental key, thereby producing exactly the results that he had taken such pains to provide against the day before.

"I am so glad you have come to London, Elizabeth," he said gently. "I can't help feeling that we have more right to you than anybody else, in virtue of—for Robert's sake, you know." He paused a moment, and then added, "It would have pained me very much if circumstances had loosened the tie between us."

Elizabeth smiled rather faintly. She too remembered those sad days and nights nine months ago, and she struggled against the remembrance. She did not answer; there was a pause.

"I don't care about artistic dressing, and I never shall," Fanny Lorimer was saying, meanwhile, to Wharton. "Of course it wouldn't do for me in the least, and that no doubt does influence me a little. But, candidly, I think people who go in for it generally look fearfully dowdy, except on great occasions when they are tremendously got up. And then there is a certain dressing-gown-and-slippers effect about it all, you know, which doesn't in the least please me. I really believe people take to it just as much from laziness as from a love of art—fewer buttons and strings, you know. Then it makes them intolerably conceited. They are always possessed by a charming sense that they are the elect, and feel wonderfully superior to us, who still believe in Paris and high-heeled shoes. The elect have always been rather a nuisance, I fancy."

As Elizabeth did not respond to his first little speech, Frank Lorimer felt obliged to say something more.

"This isn't the time for talking about it all," he

said, leaning towards her. "Some things are very sacred to one, and one fears to sully them by speaking of them at the wrong moment."

"Yes, yes," said Elizabeth quickly.

Frank spoke low and earnestly; not only his words, but the tones of his voice and his whole appearance reminded Elizabeth vividly of her husband. The two brothers had not really been very much alike,—Frank being considerably the fairer and more robust looking of the two. But, seeing him now after a long interval, Elizabeth was conscious of a resemblance between him and Robert Lorimer so strong and undeniable that for a few minutes she was almost overcome by it. She had tried very hard, during the last few weeks, to forget the sad past and start afresh. Now, as her brother-in-law leaned towards her and looked earnestly at her, the past laid cold strong hands on her again. For a moment she seemed once more to see the man who, as "a very true and perfect knight," had loved and honoured her, who had wholly and faithfully given her his heart, to whom in life and death she knew she had stood before all other women. For a moment she had a sense of irremediable loss and sorrow.

Fanny Lorimer and Wharton had found some other subject on which to express diametrically opposite opinions. Nothing could be more inharmonious than the bright room, their light war of words, and Elizabeth's bitter feelings. She dared not give way to her sudden anguish. She straightened herself up and pressed her hands hard to-

gether, not daring to look round at Frank, who was waiting for some answer. He, perceiving that she was agitated, but quite unconscious of the extent to which he was himself the cause of that agitation, spoke again after a few minutes' silence, wishing to soothe her.

"I was a little afraid," he said, his native honesty coming to the surface, "that you might have thought me forgetful or unfeeling to-night. I can't talk much about the things I feel most deeply—and it's no use, after all, talking about them. One must go on, not go back, you know. Only I should be truly sorry to have you think me indifferent. I'm not that, Elizabeth. We understand each other, don't we?"

Elizabeth bent her head in assent. Yet she feared they did not understand each other. Poor child, with her will and desires dragging her one way, and her nature and instincts dragging her another, she had much ado to understand herself sometimes.

Frank got up and gave himself a little stretch. He had said his say, now he wanted a tone of general cheerfulness to be restored as soon as possible. He crossed to where Wharton was standing, and laying his hand on his shoulder said—

"Do go and play or sing to us, Fred. You and Fanny have quarrelled quite enough for one evening."

"What shall I play?" asked Wharton.

"Oh, anything you like, my dear fellow," replied the other, and went back to his seat by Elizabeth.

It was observable that all Fred Wharton's lightness of manner left him as soon as he sat down at the piano. His face hardened and sharpened, and his whole figure seemed braced and invigorated, as soon as his hands touched the keys. He looked several years older, more positive, and more serious. The change in him was subtle, but it was quite distinct; and suggested possibilities of a depth of purpose and of feeling for which one did not give him credit at first sight. This change in Wharton was always a pleasure and interest to Frank Lorimer. He watched for it quite eagerly, and half his enjoyment in his friend's playing consisted in the singular effect it produced on the performer himself. There was a fine suggestion of power in the way in which Wharton took possession of the instrument, and forced it to yield up to him all the secrets of its inmost being—all the joy and sorrow, the beauty passing human speech, and the wild passion we dare not utter even if we could, which lie hid within it, and will only answer forth to the compelling hand of the master.

Wharton played a good deal of modern music, full of questionings and pathetic lamentations and harmonious despairs.

As Elizabeth listened to the music, it seemed to speak out for her the sorrow and confusion, the doubt, and hope, and fear that struggled in her mind. There was a certain relief in this, yet she felt it was dangerously moving.

At length Wharton stopped, as if to recover himself. Frank Lorimer, who had been leaning

back lazily on the lounge,—his legs crossed, his hands in his pockets, and his eyes fixed meditatively on the toe of his right shoe,—looked up quickly as though to demand more. Mrs. Frank gave a little rustle of relief. She found much of this sort of thing slightly exhausting. Elizabeth was silent.

After a minute's pause, Wharton began singing. His voice was not remarkable: but his singing was excellent, the phrasing good, and the sentiment perfectly refined. He evidently knew so exactly what he was about that one always had a pleasant sense of security and repose in listening to him. The song was slight enough,—of the order of sentiment that happy young people are given to enjoying, because they have very little notion what it really implies; and that older and more experienced people are somewhat disposed to fight shy of.

The words ran thus:—

"My love lies low beneath the grass;
The sad sea moans to earth and sky,—
The sweetest joys the soonest pass;
Good-bye, dear heart, good-bye.

"Her gentle eyes are closed in death;
The wind blows low, the wind blows high,—
Our mortal life is but a breath;
Good-bye, dear heart, good-bye.

"Her lovely lips are pale and cold;
When brown leaves fall, bare branches sigh,—
A merry tale too soon is told;
Good-bye, dear heart, good-bye.

"Vain is all glory, all delight,
Since man is only born to die.
Glad day lies slain by envious night;
Good-bye, dear heart, good-bye."

Wharton sang with an air of strong conviction, lending himself to the dreariness of the words, till an atmosphere of hopeless melancholy seemed to pervade the tasteful cheerful room.

Frank Lorimer,—conscious that his wife, looking extremely well and material, was sitting opposite to him; that his two babies were sleeping peacefully in their little white cribs upstairs; and that he, personally, was about as far away from everlasting partings, falling leaves, moaning seas, and all the rest of it, as any man could reasonably expect to be,—sat, smoothing his fair beard with one hand, and quietly enjoying this little excursion into the kingdom of misery. But poor Elizabeth, being already in a rather overwrought state of mind, found the song altogether too sad and too applicable. When the last wailing "good-bye" had died into silence, she was very nearly crying.

Wharton got up from the piano.

"That is deliciously dismal, isn't it?" he said, smiling, and relapsing into his ordinary easy manner. "I can't bear encouraging songs—they are horribly inartistic; and nice, heroic, drum-and-trumpet songs don't suit my voice. So," he added, still smiling and turning towards Elizabeth, "I take remarkable delight in these lamentable ditties."

Wharton was sorry he had spoken so lightly when he looked at her. From the purely artistic

point of view it was delightful to contemplate Elizabeth. Her long, clinging black dress, her pale pathetic face, the soft masses of her brown hair, her gray eyes—wide-open—looking out into space, her lips tremulous with emotion, with the dusky red background of the lounge—altogether she made a charming picture, a sort of nineteenth century edition of "Our Lady of Sorrow." Wharton was a little provoked with himself, for he saw that his words jarred upon her, and destroyed the effect of his song.

Elizabeth did not answer him; she turned away quickly to Frank Lorimer, and said, in a rather unsteady voice—

"I think I'll go home, Frank. Would you mind just walking back with me, as it's so close by?"

"But, my dearest Elizabeth," cried Mrs. Frank, breaking in with her usual emphasis and vivacity, "it's so early! Do remember that you are no longer among the Claybrooke magnates, who no doubt regard ten o'clock as a sacred hour, devoted, alike by men and gods, to saying good-night and going to bed. Remember that you have returned to civilised life, and that we are enlightened creatures, entirely indifferent to times and seasons, and new moons and fasts. Stay a little longer, Elizabeth; we shan't retire to our rest for hours yet."

But Elizabeth felt that things had gone too far. She was sensible that Wharton was watching her, and she knew that she could not recover complete serenity and composure. She wanted to be alone and quiet.

"I think I'll go, Frank, please," she said again, "if you don't mind."

There was a look of almost piteous entreaty on her face which reminded him strangely of the night they had parted in the hall at Claybrooke.

"All right," he said, "you're tired, and we'll go. It isn't worth while to call a cab, Fanny."

"Well, if you must go, Elizabeth, good-night," said Mrs. Frank. "Shall I see you to-morrow? Will you be at home in the afternoon? Oh, well, never mind now; you do look fearfully tired, all of a sudden. I can send nurse and the children round in the morning to find out your plans."

To Wharton, Elizabeth said no word good or bad. They shook hands in silence. She had an uncomfortable sense that his views regarding her were developing, and she felt somewhat defiantly towards him. Vivisection can never be very pleasant to the victim, however great be the scientific truths that it may eventually elucidate.

CHAPTER XIII.

"Motives imply weakness, and the existence of evil and temptation. The angelic nature would act from impulse alone."

AFTER Elizabeth and Frank Lorimer had gone Mr. Wharton was guilty of a distinct impertinence. He stood for fully five minutes looking meditatively into the fire, without speaking a word to his charming hostess.

He had enjoyed himself: that is to say, for some hours he had felt decidedly interested. He admired Elizabeth Lorimer's strong clear type of beauty and her stately bearing. There was no tiresome pink-and-white prettiness about her. He saw that she was one of those women in whom the mind and body are so intimately connected and so dependent on one another, that expression and manner will instantly reveal the real feeling within, even while the words spoken are quiet and restrained. But Wharton had to own that he had made a slight mistake, and that the end of the evening had not been wholly successful. He had a foolish feeling of satisfaction, though, in the fact that Elizabeth was walking home. "Our Lady of Sorrow" going off in a four-wheeled cab, or even in a hansom, would

really have been a little too trying and inharmonious. He could picture her tall black-clad figure and pale face, as she moved through the dusky streets, coming for a moment into the glare of a gas-lamp, and then passing on into the semi-darkness again. Frank was the dearest fellow in the world, of course, but he did seem rather to mar the picture somehow. Frank was too comfortable in any way to suggest romantic possibilities. Wharton feared that he was probably grumbling a little inwardly, at having to turn out into the damp at that time of night, instead of dwelling on the poetic suggestiveness of the situation.

Fanny Lorimer was also meditating upon Elizabeth, as she sat in a low chair with a piece of softly-tinted crewel-work in her hands. Her imagination was not widely sympathetic, but her guesses were generally pretty shrewd. She had to confess that she did not really understand her sister-in-law. She had often speculated as to the exact amount, and as to the quality of the affection with which Elizabeth regarded Robert Lorimer. She was disposed to think, though she had never hinted such a thing to Frank, that for some reason Elizabeth's love had never been entirely whole-hearted. Had there been another lover in the background? Or were the capacities of Elizabeth's nature only partially developed? She could not tell. It occurred to her that some day there might be a little *dénouement.* It also occurred to her that it would be very exciting to assist in bringing that *dénouement* about.

Just at this point of her meditations Fanny Lorimer looked up at Fred Wharton. He certainly

irritated her sometimes, he seemed so provokingly removed from the ordinary cares and worries of his fellow-creatures. His calm, contemplative attitude of mind seemed to give him a pull over her which she resented. She would have enjoyed seeing him rather distracted about something or other. It is always refreshing to see composed people in a fuss or at a slight disadvantage. Fred Wharton had a restraining influence upon her, too, which she felt to be annoying. He often intimated gracefully that she was talking in an exaggerated way. She had a disagreeable conviction that he took mental notes of everything she said ; and her doubts as to the tenor of those notes lent a certain sharpness to her tone when she was with him which was not natural to her at other times. As she expressed it, " he made her feel draughty;" and she was constantly disposed to bustle up and defend herself from imaginary attacks on his part.

" Your sister-in-law is remarkably charming," said Wharton at last. " She gives one the impression that there is a great deal to know in her."

" Elizabeth is not very easy to know," observed Mrs. Frank, putting up her eyebrows and indulging in a rather provoking little smile.

" So I imagine," said Wharton composedly ; " and half her charm consists in that. Most people present a flat surface to you. You can look right across them to the horizon at once. You know just all about them after meeting them once or twice. You know what views they are bound to take on every given subject, just as well as you know the colour

of their hair or eyes. But Mrs. Lorimer makes me think of an unexplored country, full of suggestions and great surprises. I only saw the coast-line from the sea this evening; but I am sure there are the most delightful lakes and rivers and hills and valleys inland."

Wharton smiled to himself.

"I find it very enjoyable," he said.

Mrs. Frank Lorimer felt annoyed. This was, she thought, rather too calm and cool a manner of observing any woman.

Fred Wharton, standing there and smiling complacently into the fire, seemed to her a little wanting in solid comfortable humanity. She resented his disposition to regard his acquaintances merely as so many interesting studies. At this moment he was so occupied with his own thoughts, so indifferent—a fact she noted as hardly civil—to her presence, that Mrs. Frank indulged herself with a good long stare at him. She did not wish to think anything complimentary about him. She felt slightly angry with him, yet she could not deny that any way he was very good-looking.

He belonged to a type, common enough in Northern Italy, but not often met with among Englishmen; and, when met with, always implying some strain of foreign blood in the ancestry. He was dark, with eyes of the peculiarly clear warm brown that an American writer has aptly described as "wine-coloured." His forehead was low, and his face perhaps was a little too broad across the cheek-bones. The chin was handsome, large, and well

rounded ; but the mouth was unfortunately English, and not Italian—wanting in fulness and in beauty of outline. Wharton's figure, though by no means that of an athlete, was firm and well proportioned. Some people who did not like him said that his forehead retreated, and that he obviously could not be endowed with much in the way of brains. One irascible old gentleman indeed,—who fancied that youth had lost all its graces and virtues since he had himself ceased to be young, and was disposed to indulge in rather bitter philippics on the subject of "modern young men,"—had one day declared that "Mr. Wharton had a head like a tom-cat." But, if there was anything feline about him, it must be granted that he contrived to keep his claws most carefully sheathed, while he showed a disposition to purr amiably on almost every occasion. At worst, he had some of the acuteness and observing power of a cat, while a charming suggestion of light-hearted kittenhood still lingered about him. It was just this boy-like freshness of feeling, combined with a certain indifference, and a pretty shrewd knowledge of the world, that made Wharton so attractive to Frank Lorimer and other men older than himself. Most women were a little piqued by his want of personal feeling, for women rarely care much for a man who suggests no latent possibilities of developing into a lover.

"You seem to have made up your mind," said Fanny Lorimer, after a time, picking up her work and beginning to draw her needle in and out of the stuff with a great show of industry,—"you seem to

have made up your mind that you will be permitted to explore this new country as much as you like. Now really, between ourselves, Mr. Wharton, I am a little doubtful about that, you know. My sister-in-law is not at all the sort of woman who would enjoy being observed as an interesting study. She is not at all given to confidences. To my mind, she is rather inscrutable."

"Ah! there lies the charm," said Wharton again. "There is nothing in the world more interesting than the process of getting to know some people. The difficulties only help to keep up the excitement. One begins by wishing a little, one ends by wishing quite immensely really to know them well."

"And when you do succeed at last in knowing these remarkable people well, what then?" asked Mrs. Frank, looking up with a charmingly innocent air of inquiry.

"Oh, well," said Wharton, smiling, "then I suppose you swear eternal friendship."

"Or just drop them," added she, looking down at her work again; "and go off and find somebody else to try experiments upon."

"You are a little severe, Mrs. Lorimer," said Wharton.

Fanny Lorimer did not answer. For once she felt she had scored off her adversary, and she was willing to rest on her success.

"But now, just as a matter of theory, you know," Wharton asked, after a minute or two, "do you think it possible for a man and woman really to make friends?"

"They generally end by making a good deal more than friends or less than friends," she answered. "I never indulge in theories, you know; I judge by practice."

"You think it can't be done, then," said Wharton. "I'm sorry. It ought to be possible, but I confess, for my own part, I have never quite succeeded. People always misunderstand one so. Now I have tried several times to make friends with young girls: but their admirable mothers always appeared, like the head of Medusa, and turned me to stone with a delicate but appalling hint regarding my 'intentions.' I never had any intentions, you know. I merely wanted to realise the sort of world a young girl lives in.—Married women are rather dangerous," he added slowly.

"That's why you have never really made friends with me, I suppose," said Fanny Lorimer quickly.

"No," answered Wharton, looking at her gently and calmly; "I have never thought you dangerous, Mrs. Lorimer. You are quite satisfied with Frank and your children, you know."

Being a little afraid that this time her adversary had scored off her, Fanny Lorimer was silent.

"I have had to fall back upon old ladies," Wharton continued, returning to the former subject of his discourse. "They are very nice and kind, and pet me delightfully: but there is a want of dramatic interest about them. They live so much in the past, and refer so constantly to excellent and clever and witty people who died long before I was born. It all seems over, you know, and that is slightly depressing."

His companion shivered a little; there was something to her painfully tragic in the idea of growing old, and of its all being over.

Wharton moved across to Mrs. Frank, and picked up some skeins of crewels which had fallen off her lap on to the floor. As he gave them to her he said—

"It would be a very great pleasure to me to know your sister-in-law better. Will you help me to do so, Mrs. Lorimer? Pray don't be so barbarous as to forbid me to explore the new country."

"Oh! my wools—thanks," she said. Then getting up and settling down the waist of her dress, she added, "There's Frank, I believe, coming in.—I don't think it will matter very much, Mr. Wharton, whether I forbid you or not. I observe that you have a remarkable knack of getting your own way."

"Have I?" he said; "yes, well, perhaps I have. That's because I am never really very anxious about getting it, after all."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Frank, looking him full in the face. "I am not the least afraid that you will ever die of a broken heart."

"I sincerely trust not," he answered, laughing. "Though really, Mrs. Lorimer, when one comes to think of it, it might be a very interesting experience."

CHAPTER XIV.

"Friendship maketh indeed a fair day in the affections from storm and tempests, . . . it maketh daylight in the understanding out of darkness and confusion of thoughts."

ELIZABETH had been nearly five months in London. Not only the Frank Lorimers, but a number of other people whom she knew had come back for the winter. An unusually handsome woman, with a pretty house and a pleasantly melancholy history, is sure to have a good many friends and admirers. Elizabeth refused to go out much, but still she saw a good deal of society. Five o'clock tea is such an innocent meal, no one can reasonably take exception to it. People would just drop in; and having dropped in once, would drop in again. Mrs. Lorimer's house, and face, and circumstances, began to make her quite a reputation in a certain set.

Yet it must be owned that poor Elizabeth was not very happy. She felt the want of a positive interest in life. Sometimes she wondered whether she had not better throw herself into good works of some sort; visit workhouses and hospitals, take up sanitary reform, or become a devoted disciple of the Charity Organisation Society. She subscribed to various

libraries, and read hosts of new books. She tried to fancy that strong sympathies for art,—music, painting, and delightfully harmonious house-furnishings, were enough to occupy her mind and heart. Sometimes she thought with envy of Mr. Leeper's enthusiasm for the Cause. Sometimes with equal envy of Mrs. Mainwaring's contented enjoyment of her position and family traditions. Sometimes she envied Fanny Lorimer her children, or Frank his newspaper work. Unfortunately, Elizabeth had no one distinct talent to which she could devote all her powers. She was troubled with the unrest which comes from appreciative sympathy with and understanding of Art, without the power of original production. At last she began to regard herself as a sort of superfluity. There seemed to be no special place for her, no real necessity for her existence. She grew depressed, and morbid, and sad.

All this Mrs. Frank Lorimer could not help noting. It made her really rather uncomfortable, and she did not quite know what to do. Resignation was not Mrs. Frank's strong point. If things seemed wrong, she instantly wanted to set them right, according to her own fashion. The consequence was that she sometimes "rushed in," where angels, being more patient and, I suppose, more sensible, would have " feared to tread."

So far Fred Wharton's opportunities of exploring the new country had not been very fruitful. Fanny Lorimer said that there would be difficulties, and her words were proving themselves tiresomely true. Wharton had to own himself that he hardly knew

more of Elizabeth Lorimer now, after a good many meetings, than he had known the first evening he saw her. He fancied that she had been on her guard with him. He had sung and played to her often, but she had always remained perfectly composed. "Our Lady of Sorrow," with the misty gray eyes that gazed despairingly out into space, had never appeared on the scene again. Wharton knew that he had seen farther into the depths of Elizabeth's nature on that first evening than he had ever seen since. Sometimes, he thought, he would not try to make nearer acquaintance with her. He was a little afraid that she took up too much space in his mental horizon. He was doubtful as to whether he was not too much interested in this study of character. Yet Wharton was so bitten with the idea of proving that it is possible for a man to make friends with a woman, and so sure that Elizabeth Lorimer was just the woman to try this rather hazardous experiment with, that he could not resist making one or two more attempts before he finally decided to give the matter up in despair.

One morning about this period when Elizabeth was sitting in her pretty drawing-room trying to read, and had wandered away from the subject of her book into rather sad meditations concerning her own unnecessariness, she was interrupted by the advent of Fanny Lorimer and Nini, both looking fresh, and neat, and self-complacent.

"I've come, my dear Elizabeth,"—began Mrs. Frank.

But she stopped. Elizabeth was not attending to her.

"Come to me, darling," said Elizabeth, holding out her arms to the slim, dainty, little girl; and then picking her up, she kissed Nini's round rosy cheeks, all cool and sweet from the cold morning air.

Elizabeth made a charming picture, as she stood balancing the child on one arm, with her strong supple figure thrown slightly back. There was a tender look in her gray eyes, and a sadness in the curves of her beautiful lips, which were in strong contrast to the merry, laughing, baby face close to her own.

Fanny Lorimer stood watching her for a moment.

"You would make a lovely Madonna, Elizabeth," she said. "Nini, poor dear, has a most unsuitable suggestion of the nineteenth century about her in that costume; but you are exquisitely mediæval."

Elizabeth set the child down on the floor again, with a sigh.

"There, Nini," she said; "run along and look on the little table in the corner, between the book-case and the window, you'll find a new dollie waiting for you with a pink hat."

Then she turned rather wearily to Mrs. Frank.

"I beg your pardon, Fanny," she said, "what were you going to say?"

"Oh!" she answered, "I merely came to you with a little message from Mr. Wharton. I'm going to tea with him the day after to-morrow, to see a sketch he has been doing for Frank. He is so anxious that you should come too.—Will you?"

"I don't care," said Elizabeth slowly, while she watched Nini.

The child was very busy, critically examining the doll; and apparently, judging by the expression of her face, was arriving at satisfactory conclusions respecting her new possession.

Mrs. Frank Lorimer opened her blue eyes rather wide at Elizabeth's reply. She stooped down and slowly rubbed a spot of mud off one of the frills of her dress.

"That is rather an extraordinary form of answer to an invitation, isn't it?" she observed mildly.

"Oh, very well, then!" said Elizabeth, "say I shall be quite delighted to go,—it's not such a true answer as the other, though."

"But, on the whole, it's rather more civil," said Mrs. Frank.

"Is this dollie for my very own?" interrupted Nini in her shrill clear little voice.

"Yes," replied Elizabeth: "but you must come and pay me for it with a sweet kiss."

She knelt down on the floor as she spoke. Nini —who regarded kisses as a necessary, but as by no means the pleasantest part of the ritual of receiving gifts—ran up, administered a hasty salute. Then, disengaging herself rapidly from Elizabeth's encircling arms, turned to her mother.

"Look, look, mother," she said, "at my dollie's pink hat!"

"You're a hard-hearted little being, after all, Nini," said Elizabeth, getting up from her knees. "I believe you care infinitely more for that foolish dollie, made of china and sawdust, than you do for me."

"I suppose we were all more or less selfish as children," observed Mrs. Frank apologetically.

"A good many of us remain so when we have ceased to be children," answered Elizabeth rather harshly.

There was a hard line between her dark eyebrows, and she stuck out her under lip, just the least bit, as she stood looking at the child and the doll. If Fanny Lorimer had known Mr. Mainwaring, she would certainly have remarked a very strong family likeness between him and his niece, at this moment.

"Selfishness is not a form of iniquity we invariably leave behind us, in the nursery with our old play-things, when we grow up," added Elizabeth.

"Is anything particular the matter with you this morning?" asked Mrs. Frank.

"Nothing at all. I have said I am delighted to accept Mr. Wharton's invitation for the day after to-morrow. Pray tell him so."

Mrs. Frank gave her shoulders a little shrug.

"You're very inscrutable," she said; "however, you will come. Then if it's fine, we can walk down to Chelsea by the Embankment. I'll call for you about three. Come along, Nini, and say good-bye to kind Aunt Lizzie, who gives you dollies and all manner of lovely things."

"Good-bye!" said Elizabeth gently, but she did not kiss the child again. Nini, it must be allowed, seemed supremely indifferent to the omission, and walked off with considerable dignity by her mother's side, prattling cheerfully to her new doll.

The afternoon of Fred Wharton's little tea-party was clear and bright; and the two ladies set out with a certain sense of enjoyment on their walk to Chelsea. Elizabeth, with her country breeding, had been accustomed to take plenty of physical exercise; lately she had been leading rather a sedentary and lazy life, which had by no means improved either her health or spirits. As she paced along by the river-side this afternoon, the keen wind and the thin frosty sunshine seemed to put new vigour into her.

She thought of the short winter days down in Midlandshire years ago—not so very many years though, after all—when, the ground being too hard for hunting, she and Mr. Mainwaring and young Edward Dadley had driven over to Lowcote, and skated till dusk.—Of the wild cries of the frozen-out water-fowl, and the clear ringing of the skates on the ice, and the graceful motion of the skaters, and the sound of a sudden laugh or call in the still air —while the sun, a crimson ball, sank down in the west, and the gray country faded into the twilight, and the near trees grew black and rigid against the flaming evening sky. Ah! those sweet sad days that are no more. Poor Elizabeth would gladly, for the moment at least, have missed out all of her life that lay between the present and that pleasant time; would gladly have found herself skating over the gleaming ice, hand in hand with her boy-lover once again.

"For pity's sake, Elizabeth, don't walk so fast," cried Fanny Lorimer breathlessly; for instinctively

Elizabeth had quickened her pace as she thought of Lowcote and the skaters.

Fanny Lorimer, like all city-bred women, walked, not so much with the intention of getting to a certain place within a certain time, as with the intention of seeing and being seen.

"There is no such desperate necessity for saving five minutes," she said; "and of all things in the world, that which I abhor most, is arriving at anybody's house in a breathless condition, with a face like a peony."

"You'll be frozen if you dawdle," said Elizabeth shortly.

"Yes; but surely there is some reasonable medium between doing that and walking for a wager," answered the other.

Elizabeth moderated her pace. She was quite roused from her reverie. There was nothing dreamy or sentimental about Fanny Lorimer; and she had a curious power of compelling her companions to move in her own clear everyday atmosphere.

Fred Wharton's rooms were on the first floor of an old-fashioned house, looking out on to the river. He had discovered them when he first settled in London, and had now thoroughly taken root in them. He liked to wander about: but he also liked to collect all manner of odds and ends of all kinds; and already his material possessions were so numerous that it was absolutely necessary for him to have some place to leave them in. As far as he had a home, this house in Chelsea was his home. He went away for months at a time: but

always as a peaceful and comfortable background to his wanderings lay the long low old-fashioned first-floor rooms, with their view across the wide river.

Before ringing the bell when they arrived, Mrs. Frank Lorimer paused, and then turning to Elizabeth, said—

"Will you go in? I'll join you in ten minutes. I've just remembered some tiresome people that I ought to call upon, close by here. I've owed them a visit for months, and this is such an excellent opportunity of paying it. I shan't be long."

"I'll come too," said Elizabeth, who did not care to present herself to their host alone.

"Oh no! pray don't," answered Fanny Lorimer quickly, and with rather unnecessary emphasis. "They're fearfully dull people; you wouldn't like them a bit, and there is no reason why you should know them. Pray don't come; I shall be back directly."

To clinch the matter she rang the bell. Nodding to Elizabeth and saying "au revoir," she turned quickly into the street again. So Elizabeth had nothing for it but to go upstairs alone, feeling a good deal annoyed. It would seem so odd, she thought. She did not the least care to be forced in this way into a *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Wharton.

The room she was ushered into was a large one, with three windows looking towards the river. It was low, and was furnished quaintly enough, yet with a certain disregard for modern canons of taste. But for a soft dusky richness in the general effect

of it, it might have been called rather confused and untidy. Wharton seemed to have taken pleasure in collecting the most strangely miscellaneous objects, and compelling them to form an harmonious whole. Some of his friends hinted, indeed, that his rooms looked very much as if they belonged to the "property man:" but he sternly refused to modify any peculiarities. "I live in my rooms, not you," he would say; "I enjoy incongruities and confusions —it is like life."

Elizabeth, on this occasion, was too anxious to account for the fact of her appearing all alone to bestow much observation on her surroundings: but before she had time to offer any explanation, Wharton came forward to meet her with a look of genuine pleasure.

"How very good of you to come," he said cordially. There was something so sincere in the sound of his greeting that Elizabeth's sense of embarrassment quickly melted before it.

"My sister-in-law will be here in a minute or two," she said. "She deserted me on your doorstep, remembering suddenly that she had a visit to pay close by. She begged me to tell you that she would follow me directly."

Wharton smiled. He felt a little indifferent as to the length of Mrs. Frank Lorimer's absence. Elizabeth looked very young and attractive after her quick walk in the frosty air. There was an unusual colour in her cheeks, and her gray eyes shone bright and dark under their long lashes.

"Ah!" said Wharton, "it is a long way for Mrs.

Frank Lorimer to come. I am only too glad that she should make the expedition useful to herself as well as pleasant to me."

There was a moment's pause. Elizabeth did not quite know what to say next, as her companion's last observation called for no rejoinder.

"You have been doing a sketch for Frank," she observed at last a little awkwardly. "May I see it?"

"Oh! it's rather horrible now that it's finished, Mrs. Lorimer," he answered. "I thought it was going to be nice at first—however, there it is on the easel in the window, if you really care to see it."

Elizabeth moved across the room and stood looking at the picture. It was a graceful misty drawing of little Nini, worked in charcoal. Wharton had begun it one evening at the Frank Lorimers', when the child, tired with a game of play, had lain half asleep on her mother's knee. The subject caught his fancy and he had spent some time in working it out.

"But it's lovely!" said Elizabeth.

"I'm so glad you like it," the young man answered. He was standing near her, and watching her intently as she bent forward to look closely at the drawing.

"You draw as well as you play," she said suddenly, turning round to him. "You are very fortunate."

She spoke seriously—not as praising his talents, but rather, he thought, as bidding him give thanks for the possession of them.

"Am I very fortunate?" he said, smiling again. "I am not quite sure."

"I think so," answered Elizabeth. "You artists have troubles like the rest of us—some, I suppose, that we more commonplace people cannot fully comprehend: but you have the intense joy and relief of utterance. Ah!" she said, "I for one keep all my pity for the poor dumb souls who can only feel and cannot speak."

Elizabeth remembered the thoughts which had so moved her as she walked along by the river. She would have given a good deal to possess the power of speaking out the emotions they had caused her in some artistic form.

"The disappointment is generally more present to my mind than the relief, I'm afraid," said Wharton. "All one's work falls so lamentably short of what one wants to do."

"Still you have something to do, something to work for," she answered. "You have the satisfaction of knowing what you want, even if you can't always reach it. So many of us waste our lives utterly, because we never know exactly what to aim at."

"Oh!" said Wharton, shaking his head. "People are all so much too fond of doing nowadays. Why can't they leave the doing alone, and just be—isn't that enough? They hurry, and worry, and scramble, and quite forget what a much more dignified and graceful spectacle they would present to the universe if they were a trifle less busy and anxious."

Elizabeth sat down thoughtfully on a chair in

front of the easel. She paused a moment before speaking.

"But surely one must have a distinct object in life," she said.

"Must one?" asked Wharton. "I have never been able quite to see the necessity for it."

Elizabeth looked up at him inquiringly.

"Isn't it enough," he said, "to enjoy oneself, to be pleasant and to please one's friends?"

"Perhaps—if you have friends," she observed.

"Why, you must have plenty of friends, any way, Mrs. Lorimer," said he brightly.

"If you mean just the people whom I know, yes, I have plenty," answered Elizabeth.

She was too much absorbed in her own train of thought to observe that the conversation had assumed a new complexion, and had drifted away from the general into the personal.

"But," she added, "I am afraid, like most women, I know very little about real friendship; about the sort of friendship which really makes part of one's life. I should like to have friends as men have them, but I don't know how to begin."

Elizabeth spoke quite simply, thinking merely of her own feelings and not at all of her companion.

A very bright light came into Fred Wharton's brown eyes, and he bent forward towards her as he answered—

"I fancy I know a good deal about what men call friendship—the friendship which, as you say, makes a real part of one's life. If you want to know about it I think I could teach you."

Suddenly the singularity of her position struck Elizabeth. She had quarrelled with the narrow old-world conventionalities down at Claybrooke—surely she was getting far enough away from conventionality now! She turned her head and gazed out across the murky river, running so swiftly and silently in the gathering darkness down to the sea. The sky was very pale and clear above. Along the roadways flickered the long lines of gas-lamps. It looked cold, and hard, and cruel, somehow, out there in the dusk. Then she turned again and glanced round the warm luxurious room, with its fanciful furniture and rich mellow colouring. Finally, she looked up at the dark handsome face of the young man who stood waiting before her.

She gave a long, shuddering sigh, as of one waking from a troubled dream ; and then said gently—

"I think I should be very glad if you would teach me."

There was an expression almost of triumph about Wharton.

"That is kind of you," he said simply. Then he added, holding out his hand—"It is a compact, Mrs. Lorimer—you must give me your hand on it."

Elizabeth laid her hand in his for a moment rather unwillingly. She wondered what she might be binding herself to. Did it really mean anything, or was it merely a pretty bit of child's play?

Mrs. Frank Lorimer, returning from her visit and coming into the room just at the conclusion of this little ceremony, was conscious of receiving a certain very vivid impression. She paused only for an in-

stant of time in the doorway, before Wharton, turning round, came forward to welcome her: but in that instant her innocent blue eyes had pretty thoroughly taken in the situation.—Elizabeth was sitting in front of the easel, sideways on a quaintly-shaped chair, with her hands resting, lightly clasped together, on the back of it. She had unfastened her thick fur-trimmed mantle at the neck, and it hung in heavy folds from her shoulders, showing part of the body of her black dress and the white about her throat. The hair on her forehead had been ruffled by the wind during her walk, and curled up about the edge of her bonnet, softening the hard line of it. She was looking up, with her lips parted as though about to speak. The light from some candles in brass sconces near the fireplace fell full upon her face.

Wharton's back was towards Mrs. Frank. She could not see how he was looking; but his attitude seemed expressive, she thought, of more than mere polite toleration of his fair companion.

"Oh!" said Fanny Lorimer, as her host came towards her, "my dear Mr. Wharton, I owe you ten thousand apologies. I had wanted to pay that visit for such ages—I was sure you would forgive my being a little late—and then, to my utter distraction, the wretched people were at home. And can you tell why it is," she added, "that the less power people have of entertaining you, the longer they are determined that you shall stay with them?—Thanks! yes, I will sit down. How good of you to wait tea for me!—I have known thoroughly uninteresting people, who insisted upon asking one to dinner at half-past

six and requiring one to stay till heaven knows what time of night, simply, apparently, because they had nothing on earth to say to one. Whereas delightful people, whom you feel you would be happy to spend years with, ask you at a quarter past eight, and turn you out again at eleven. Now why is it?"

"I must think the question over before I venture to give an answer," said Wharton, smiling. "You, at all events, Mrs. Lorimer, may claim to belong to the delightful section of society, since you are so late in arriving here to-day."

Fanny Lorimer laughed. She felt in the most charmingly amiable humour.

While Wharton made tea she wandered about the room, chattering all the time. She inspected the sketch of Nini, with which she declared herself absolutely enchanted, and praised everything liberally, the tea included.

"How I wish you would do us a picture of Elizabeth," she said at last. "Somebody really ought to do a picture of her. She looked like the most delightful mediæval Madonna when she was nursing Nini the other day."

The advantage of having a reputation for talking very much, is that it gives you admirable opportunities of saying a host of things you want to say, without giving them an appearance of undue prominence. Mrs. Frank always managed to serve her own little purposes: but she merged her important sentences so cleverly in the general flow of her conversation, that they seemed at the time in no way particularly remarkable.

It was only when Elizabeth shook hands with him, just as she was going away, that Fred Wharton referred to Mrs. Frank's suggestion.

"Will you let me make a drawing of you?" he said.

"Is that one of your lessons in friendship?" asked Elizabeth, smiling—"because if so, I suppose I am bound to say yes."

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

"A mere spectator of other men's fortunes and adventures, and how they act their parts, which methinks are diversely presented unto me, as from a common theatre or scene."

SOME people, I fear, may not unjustly complain of the commonplace characters and trivial incidents which they are invited to contemplate in this little tale; and which are hardly worth the ink and paper —let alone the time—that has been wasted upon them. But I would protest, with all humility and sincerity, that I do not lay claim to the title of poet or artist, still less to that of moralist or preacher. Those who want illumination and instruction must seek it elsewhere;—and surely in the present day it is easy enough to get an immense amount of information concerning all subjects at a very small cost. Sometimes, indeed, one is a little tempted to wonder whether the teachers do not outnumber the scholars, since most persons whom one meets with are so willing to expound all dark sayings and reveal all mysteries.

I have no claim to belong to the pedagogic and

improving class; and would merely ask the gentle reader—if in these enlightened days that kind and sympathetic being still exists—to picture some lazy loiterer, arrayed in a torn cloak and tattered jerkin, and a cap which once had bells to it—their old-world jangling was so sadly out of tune with the triumphal war-march of modern progress, that he pulled them all off long ago—sitting among the dusty grass and wild flowers, by the wayside of life, and telling simple stories to the passers-by. Not telling them to the wise and prudent and successful, who would certainly call him a sturdy beggar, a mere cumberer of the ground, and bid him either set about some useful business, or proceed to improve himself off the face of the earth, with all possible despatch: but telling them to quiet ordinary folk, who are not very wise or very successful, who are a little confused with the turmoil and the strife of tongues, and a little weary and footsore with the journey;—begging them to rest awhile with him by the roadside, and listen to simple tales of friendship and of sorrow, of laughter and of lovers' kisses; begging them to judge gently all the barren, groping, uncertain lives around them, and to smile,—if they will,—but smile very tenderly at the strange tragi-comedy of every day. He has neither advice to give, nor solution to offer—the poor Fool, in his ragged motley, is hardly likely to have discovered the panacea for this world's troubles, when the great and learned and courageous have failed so signally to do so. But he clings to one or two fantastic hopes that have lingered

with us through many ages; and does not despair, as he watches,—from amongst the dusty grass and flowers,—the anxious eager multitudes jostling each other along the great highroad, which stretches across the isthmus of this life, between the two eternities.

It is always an ungracious task to try to show any unvarnished side of truth; and the unvarnished truth concerning themselves has usually been singularly unpalatable to members of the human family —only the Fool would attempt to present it. His acknowledged want of wits may save him from the angry punishments with which men are wont to visit the indiscretion of those who try to tell them what they really are. Under the shelter of the cap and bells, alone, can one venture to say that absolute black and white, undoubted hero and villain, are hardly ever to be met with; and that heaven and hell certainly belong to quite another state of being than to this present one;—that original sin is pretty evenly distributed among us all;—that even the saint may be caught wearing strangely dirty old clothes, while the sinner is found arrayed, now and then, in a garment of genuine righteousness;—that, while man is very little higher than the beasts, he is, also, very little lower than the angels.

In treating poor Elizabeth Lorimer's character from this confusing and unsatisfactory point of view, I know that I run the risk of losing her many friends and admirers. Yet, in truth, she was very far from being an ideal woman. She could neither satisfy those excellent persons who have a senti-

mental longing after what has been called "the constant mourner;" nor could she please the more light-minded class, who are disposed to recommend plenty of eating and drinking to-day, since the time for all such enjoyment may be passed and over by to-morrow. She was subtly compounded of good and evil, nobility and frivolity, of fine aspirations and commonplace selfishness. She was capable of determining against her higher instincts, and then repenting of her error, all too late, like many another young creature. She loved life, and would fain have seen good days; and,—perhaps consequently,—she had but a misty and indistinct perception of the infinite value of a humble spirit and a broken and contrite heart.

Nearly a year had passed away since Elizabeth had made her compact with Fred Wharton in the quaintly-furnished studio down by the river. She had spent the early summer in London, and then had gone abroad with the Frank Lorimers,—Wharton, of course, being of the party,—and had studied the art of Platonic friendship on the wild sea-shore and among the bare windy uplands of Brittany. Her connection with Claybrooke had been restricted to letters. She had offered to go to the Rectory, it is true: but, unfortunately, she happened to propose herself just at the time when Mr. and Mrs. Mainwaring were about to make their yearly visit to Selford; and it was too much to expect their dignified and stately plans to be set aside for Elizabeth—whose appreciation of Claybrooke and of its owners' society, her aunt, at least, regarded as so

distinctly limited. Mr. Mainwaring had paid her one or two visits in London, which were chiefly remarkable for their extreme brevity. The Rector, it must be confessed, did not find himself in very active sympathy with his niece's present surroundings.

Face downwards, in the narrow writing-table drawer, still lay the charcoal sketch of Robert Lorimer. Elizabeth had never moved it from its resting-place since the day when she had decided to forget the past, and to try and find fresh joy and hope in the future. In some fabrics it is possible to patch a rent for a time; but eventually the stuff gives and gives, and, as we know, the new piece only makes the hole in the old garment worse in the end. Elizabeth's determination not to grieve for her husband's death had, in a way, kept her attention fixed on the fact of his death. She had striven to patch the cruel rent that had been made in her happiness: but as time went on the threads began to strain and give out, and the sense of the magnitude of her misfortune grew greater, instead of lessening.

At moments, by the sea-shore, or on summer evenings when Fred Wharton poured out his whole soul in music and in song, or as she watched Frank and Fanny Lorimer playing with their two children, the sense of her own loss and loneliness would almost overpower Elizabeth. She dreaded these feelings of sorrow, she fought against them, and was glad when the trivial interests of every day claimed her whole thought and attention. To her companions she seemed to be drifting farther and

farther away from the past. She appeared gay and cheerful; and yet there was an unrestfulness and a certain necessity for excitement about her, which puzzled Fanny Lorimer a little sometimes. She wondered whether Elizabeth was not developing feelings which could not, strictly, be described as Platonic for Fred Wharton.

But I think Elizabeth may be quite exonerated from any charge of this kind. She was almost painfully conscious that, if it were possible for her to meet Robert Lorimer now, for the first time, she might love him in a very different fashion, to that in which she had loved him when they met nearly three years before. As her experience of life widened and her knowledge of men and women increased, she appreciated more and more the true worth of her husband's character. She realised, too, how cruelly he must have suffered in bidding good-bye to life and love, in the very prime of his manhood. Elizabeth became aware that it might not be impossible for her to worship—all too late—the memory of the man whom she had loved very inadequately while he lived. That fashion of stoning the prophets, and subsequently—in a fit of bitter remorse—building them magnificent sepulchres, did not die out with the old dispensation: but is practised pretty freely by husbands and wives, parents and children, relations and friends, even to the present day.

If Fred Wharton had been asked to give a disquisition on Platonic friendship about this period, he would have pronounced it a very interesting, but

slightly agitating, form of entertainment. He had seen a great deal of Elizabeth, he knew her remarkably well; yet—carrying out his old metaphor of the unexplored country—he told himself that though the hills, and valleys, and lakes, and streams, were very delightful, there was still an unknown region, far inland, into which he had never yet succeeded in penetrating. He was haunted by the same notion as Fanny Lorimer—namely, that some day Elizabeth would develop suddenly, in an unlooked-for direction, and surprise him very greatly. There was something rather fascinating in this idea; it made her all the more interesting to him; yet it troubled him too. Wharton hated surprises. He had tried to imagine all sorts of combinations of circumstances which might produce this sudden development in Elizabeth, so that he might be prepared for it when it came: but he could not see his way at all clearly yet. He told himself, however, that women certainly were very interesting, and he began to neglect his other friends a little. Men are comparatively easy to understand; they are nice comfortable creatures: but make by no means such suggestive and exciting companions, as a handsome, brilliant, gray-eyed, young lady.

At the beginning of the winter season, that burning and shining light of the dramatic profession, Clement Bartlett, came out in a new piece. His friends made a strong rally round him, filled innumerable stalls, and applauded, even his faintest efforts, with a vigour and enthusiasm, which, it is to be feared, were slightly incomprehensible to the

rest of the house. Be that as it may, on the following day—a Sunday—Mr. Bartlett, being anxious to thank his loyal supporters and talk over the position with them generally, held a sort of levee in his rooms, in the afternoon; at which the members of the "Modern Society of Friends"—as Mrs. Frank called them—mustered in great numbers. Frank Lorimer of course was there. As the sub-editor and dramatic critic of a well-known paper, he was naturally very precious in the young actor's sight.

Fred Wharton went too,—not so much because he desired particularly to add his voice to the chorus of praise, as because he had nothing particular to do, and thought he should enjoy a walk across the park with Frank. He was rather silent and preoccupied. He had been working away at Platonic friendship for a long time now, and he found it more engrossing and bewildering than ever. He began to think a man wanted a very steady head who meant to go in for much of that sort of thing.

It was not till he and Frank were walking home under the bare black trees in the growing darkness, while the air was full of the sound of church-bells—that strange sound in which sorrow treads so hard on the heels of joy—calling faithful souls to their evening prayers, that Wharton seemed with a certain effort to shake off his preoccupation, and that he began to talk again.

"I'm rather dissatisfied with myself, Frank," he remarked suddenly. "It is a new sensation. I suppose it's a sign that I am growing old."

Frank Lorimer was running over some sentences in his mind, in which he was trying to adjust the rival claims of friendship and truth in a critique on Clement Bartlett's performance of the night before. He answered at random, not thinking what he was saying.

"Oh, you add dissatisfaction to all the other disagreeables of old age then, do you?"

"I don't add it," answered Wharton quickly. "Heaven preserve me from adding one straw to a burden which I shall have to bear myself some day! It will be quite heavy enough any way without my private contributions. But it is obvious," he added, "that old people must be dissatisfied with themselves. If they have any powers of reflection left, they must be pretty keenly sensible of the immense number of mistakes they have succeeded in making in the course of their lives."

Frank Lorimer drew his hand down reflectively over his fair pointed beard. Really he could not honestly praise Clement Bartlett's performance very much. Fortunately there was the acknowledged excellence of the young man's figure to fall back upon: but it is rather difficult to fill half a column with a eulogy on a man's figure. The public might object to it, and not without reason, Frank felt. Meanwhile common civility demanded that he should make some comment on Wharton's disquisitions upon the distressing position of aged and reflective souls.

"Are you painfully sensible of mistakes then, just now?" he asked abstractedly.

"I believe I am rather worried," answered the other.

This was such an entirely surprising announcement as coming from Fred Wharton, of all people in the world, that Frank Lorimer was roused effectually from his meditations upon Mr. Bartlett. He looked round sharply at his companion: but in the dusk it was difficult to catch the expression of his face.

"You're a little out of sorts, my dear fellow," said Frank. "You have taken to never going out anywhere. Half the men at Bartlett's this afternoon were complaining that they never see you now."

"It's a horrible thing," said Wharton, half laughing and half in earnest. "I am getting a little bored. I am beginning to feel uninterested."

"Oh, you are only hipped," answered the other. "You want more society."

"Perhaps I do," said Wharton uneasily. "I seem to be changing somehow; I don't know quite what is coming over me. I used to look on at life so contentedly. I used to feel—I suppose all the talk at Clement Bartlett's this afternoon has put the idea into my head—as if I had got a very good private box at the general show. I just sat still and watched the play. I wasn't unsympathetic; indeed, sometimes I was inclined to applaud quite vigorously, and the tragic scenes upset me dreadfully. But I had a comfortable feeling that as I had not written the piece I was in no way implicated in the course of it. Now I begin to wonder

whether I have not been rather cold-blooded, and whether I have not made a mistake in not being more actively human."

"Marry," observed Frank Lorimer, smiling. "It is the best cure for your state of mind. A wife is pretty sure to make you sufficiently human."

Wharton stopped, and said almost petulantly:—

"Why do you say that? It is tiresome. It is dreadfully wanting in originality."

Frank was silent. He did not understand his friend's sudden outburst of irritability. He had spoken quite innocently, and without any real desire that his advice should be taken. If he had been asked, indeed, Frank would certainly have given it as his opinion that Wharton would probably never marry, that it would be a pity if he should do so, as it would rob him of half his present charm.

They walked on in silence for a little while under the bare trees. If people were cross, Frank thought, it was always safest to let them alone. Bad temper is like a cold in the head—it is much best to let it have its course, instead of rushing in with consolatory camphor, and sal-volatile, and other well-intentioned remedies, which generally end by merely adding one or two new discomforts to the original one. Frank did not agitate himself, but relapsed into his difficult piece of criticism again.

"And I'm not at all sure that I am so very anxious to be cured of my present state of mind, after all," said Wharton after a pause. "Any way, I am not the least inclined to take the desperate measure you propose. The cure would be consider-

ably more confusing than the disease, it seems to me. I am only angry with myself for feeling these things at all."

Frank had just got hold of an admirable sentence.

"Then don't feel them, my dear fellow," he said.

"I couldn't give up my attitude of spectator altogether, you know," Wharton went on argumentatively. He seemed to attach very much more importance to Frank Lorimer's random suggestion than it at all deserved. "Women are so differently constituted to us, that it is a thousand to one if I should find any woman—a really charming one, you know—who would be willing just to sit still and observe with me. She would get excited some day, and want to go down on to the stage into the thick of it all."

He paused, and then added lightly:—

"I am very philosophic, personally I am not at all impulsive: but if she went down, I am dreadfully afraid I should not have sufficient strength of mind to let her go alone."

"Probably not," answered Frank Lorimer, smiling.

"And that would be intolerable," said Wharton. "It would upset all my system. It would be the greatest mistake of all. No," he added, as they passed out of the comparative quiet of the Park into the noise and movement of Piccadilly; "marriage is out of the question from my point of view"

CHAPTER II.

" When all the world is old, lad,
And all the trees are brown,
And all the sport is stale, lad,
And all the wheels run down ;
Creep home, and take your place there,
The spent and maimed among ;
God grant you find one face there
You loved when all was young."

ONE dull, late, winter afternoon Mr. Mainwaring was riding slowly home towards Claybrooke. There had been a frost the night before, which had given in the morning, leaving the roads deep in greasy yellow clay-mud. Long lines of half-melted snow lay under the hedges on the side away from the sun. The hedges themselves were a hard purplish black in the gathering dusk. The broad pasture-lands looked brown and sad in the uncertain light; and the spaces of turf, on either side the road, were coarse and boggy from the wet, which stood in little dirty pools every here and there. A bleak south-easterly wind cried shrill through the bare hawthorns and the scattered elm-trees, promising more snow. It was a chilly dreary evening, on which even a healthy unimaginative man might well be affected

by the outward aspects of nature; might be full of gloomy fancies, and take depressing views of human nature and of things in general.

Mr. Mainwaring had had a trying day, and was a little disposed to think that everything was "going to the bad." He was chilled and somewhat tired; but, wishing to spare his horse, he jogged along slowly up the muddy road under the broad sweep of lowering gray sky. His head was sunk into the collar of his coat, which he had pulled up to keep off some of the cold south-easterly wind; his shoulders were up to his ears; he held the bridle with stiff fingers; both he and his big chestnut hunter were splashed and plastered with clay-mud from head to foot. He had ridden a good way to the meet in the morning, which had been bright enough with pale winter sunshine; had seen friends, and had a cheery time till about one o'clock; then his horse cast a shoe, and he had wasted some time seeking a blacksmith to put on another. When he came up with the hounds again they were running, and he had about a quarter of an hour's gallop. They lost their fox, and moved off to draw a distant covert; drew it blank;—and about half-past three, with a snowstorm gathering away down in the south-east, Mr. Mainwaring found himself with a good fourteen miles to ride home alone.

He was disgusted, too, with several little social incidents in the day's work. Not even fox-hunting seemed to him quite a safe sport for an English gentleman in these degenerate times, when the sons of tradesmen, who had made all their money in

candles, or stockings, or soap, rode better horses than he could afford to ride, and treated him as an equal instead of a superior.—Hardly treated him as an equal, indeed, but rather as an antiquated and behind-the-world sort of old gentleman, who was by no means up to the level of the civilisation of the present day. He was specially incensed against a certain young man of boisterous manners and of a somewhat flashy appearance—nearly related, it was said, to some well-known London tobacconist —who had lately settled in the neighbourhood, kept a lot of horses, and hunted four or five days a week. The young man in question happened to be particularly bumptious and interfering by nature: but Mr. Mainwaring, when annoyed, did not always take the trouble to distinguish carefully between the sins of the individual and those of the class to which he belonged. He kindly accredited the race of retail tradesmen in general with the offences of this young man in particular, and condemned them all; while the worst of it was, that Mr. Mainwaring could not deny that the fellow really rode hard, and had plenty of pluck.

"There's nothing left," he grumbled, "that a gentleman can do, without finding himself rubbing shoulders with half the shopkeepers in the country. What with a radical parliament and a radical press, the poor old country's going to the dogs as fast as it can. Fortunately my time won't be very long. I shall be safe in the churchyard before the worst of it comes, please God, but it's a bad look-out ahead —very bad."

It struck Mr. Mainwaring that his own life, looking back on it, was very like the history of that day. A cheery start in the morning sunshine; a capital horse under him; hope for the coming hours; plenty of friends; a splendid burst for a few minutes over the grass, when the pace was hot and his blood tingled with healthy excitement. Then pottering about the dreary woodlands, in the chill mist, drawing and drawing for the fox that could never be found; and, at last, the long lonely ride home in the cold and the growing darkness. The day dying, the sport all over, only the weariness and want of success left. Dirty, tired, bespattered, old,—that was what it all came to in the end. Alas! for the pity of it!

Mr. Mainwaring stuck out his under lip and set his teeth hard, bent his head a little lower to avoid the bitter wind, and trotted on, slowly and doggedly, up the muddy road, with its wet strip of turf on either hand, and bare, black, hawthorn hedges.

The hall at the Rectory, with a glowing fire of great logs upon the hearth; Bunton waiting with dignified solicitude to attend upon his master; and Mrs. Mainwaring, with her spotless cap, pretty little face, and tender wistful manner, coming forward in the ruddy light to welcome her beloved lord,—all these things were in most agreeable contrast to the sad, cold, gray night outside.

"I am too dirty to come near you, my dear," said Mr. Mainwaring, looking kindly at his wife. "I'll go into the study for ten minutes and get a good warm; and then, Bunton, I'll have a hot bath in my dress-

ing-room, before dinner.—We've had a wretched day," he added, as he followed Mrs. Mainwaring into the study. "The grass is as heavy as the plough; and there seem to be no foxes in the country. Only had about ten minutes' gallop the whole day. Found a fox in Michael's Spinny, just the other side of the turnpike at Lowcote,—ran him into a drain on Staley's farm at Highthorne, and there was an end of the whole thing."

Mr. Mainwaring stood in front of the study fire, with his hands under the tails of his hunting-coat, stamping his feet to get a little warmth into them, and thereby plentifully besmearing the floor with the half-dry mud off his boots.

Mrs. Mainwaring abhorred a mess as sincerely as Nature is said to abhor a vacuum: but she was always too thankful to get her husband home, safe and sound, on these occasions, to make any objections to the large supply of wet clay which he invariably brought in with him.

"I am very sorry you have had such a bad day," she said sympathetically; and then added after a pause, "Mrs. Adnitt has been over here to-day. You remember Edward Dadley, don't you, Gerald?"

"Yes, to be sure I do," said the Rector; "and remember that he behaved like a fool too. What about him?"

"Oh! only Lucy Adnitt has been staying up in the north, and heard a good deal about him. He has been away travelling in America—shooting, I believe—for the last two years. He has just come back. He seems to have had a quarrel with his

father about that cousin whom he wanted him to marry, you know. She's an heiress and the two estates join. Edward Dadley went away because of it."

"Just like old Dadley!" said Mr. Mainwaring bitterly. "I always thought he was a grasping fellow. His grandfather was a tradesman, and I suppose it's in the blood. The boy was well enough,—rather weak, perhaps, but I was fond of him. He behaved like an ass at last, though—his father's fault too, I daresay."

Mrs. Mainwaring, observing that her husband was not in a particularly urbane state of mind, seemed to think it well to change the conversation.

"Mr. Leeper is going to leave Lowcote," she remarked, a little inconsequently.

"That's a good riddance, any way," observed Mr. Mainwaring. "We can do very well without him here."

"He has got a large parish somewhere in the Black Country. The Adnitts are very anxious about the next presentation to the living at Lowcote."

"Why, it's not in their hands," said the Rector.

"No, but they think they might bring some influence to bear on the Bishop. Mrs. Adnitt asked me about Mr. Jones."

"Oh! Jones is a good creature enough," said Mr. Mainwaring a trifle contemptuously, stamping his feet again so that he showered mud liberally over the carpet. "But the old squire has an uncommonly hot tongue, you know, and if he talked much to

Jones, as he can talk when he is put out, the poor fellow would be frightened clean out of his wits. They want a stronger man than Jones at Lowcote. Between ourselves, Susan, dear old Adnitt is a bit of a tyrant."

Poor Mrs. Mainwaring was fated on that evening, much against her will, to say things by no means calculated to soothe her husband. She moved away from the fireplace, and busied herself with putting some stray papers tidy on the study table.

"I find there has been some very unpleasant gossip going about Lowcote for some time," she said, without looking up. "I really hardly care to mention it, Gerald, but it annoyed me extremely."

"Really; why, what's the matter there?" asked Mr. Mainwaring. He was getting rather impatient; he wanted to go and have his hot bath.

"It seems that an extraordinary report has got abroad through Mr. Leeper saying something about Elizabeth."

"Good gracious!" Mr. Mainwaring exclaimed, thoroughly roused now, and interested. "What on earth can the man have to say about Elizabeth?"

"Oh, it may all be untrue, you know, Gerald," answered Mrs. Mainwaring quickly. "Mrs. Adnitt said it was only gossip. She only wanted to know whether we knew anything about it. There seems," she added, after a moment's pause, "to be a general impression that Mr. Leeper is very much—well, in fact, that he is in love with Elizabeth."

"God bless my soul!" cried the Rector. "Why, I'd as soon the child went and married a stake out

of the hedge as that hard, lanky, bilious-looking fellow. What a piece of intolerable impertinence for him to think of such a thing!"

"But it mayn't be true, Gerald," said Mrs. Mainwaring, quite alarmed at the sudden storm she had raised.

"True?" answered the Rector bitterly. "Anything may be true nowadays. All the old landmarks are going. Only to-day I learnt how much I was out of it all."

He felt again something of the distrust of the future, and contempt towards the present, that had troubled him on his lonely ride home. At that moment, it seemed to Mr. Mainwaring a not unfitting conclusion to the day's work that Mr. Leeper —whom he most cordially disliked—should become his nephew, and eventually step into his shoes at Claybrooke. "The old order" was changing, he felt, more every day; and he belonged to the old order. Mr. Mainwaring had a sense upon him, sometimes, that the world was walking right away from him, and that he was fighting sadly—at moments almost half-heartedly—in a lost cause. The old-fashioned country gentleman, with all his old kindly, rather unimaginative system of things, was slowly giving way, he feared, before the new age of so-called progress, and culture, and art.

But the Rector was tired and stiff and chilly; he could not meditate for any long space of time, under existing circumstances, even upon the doubtfulness of his own position in the general economy of things. He turned to his wife after a moment, and asked more sadly than angrily—

"Did he see her often, Susan?"

"No, no, not very often, I think, when she was here last," answered Mrs. Mainwaring.

She was trying hard to remember: but she was a little confused and agitated, first by the vehemence and now by the sadness of her husband's manner. She had a good memory for small events, but the meetings in question had taken place more than a year before, and it was slightly difficult to recall them accurately.

"He called here once—I think it was only once —when you were away in July; and we met him again at the Adnitts' afterwards. There he talked a good deal to Elizabeth."

"Oh, well," said the Rector, who found this piece of information decidedly reassuring, "that does not amount to very much. You contradicted it all to Mrs. Adnitt, I suppose?"

"Yes, I spoke very strongly," answered Mrs. Mainwaring. "But you see, Gerald, for a long while I have not had Elizabeth's full confidence."

The Rector was always disposed to advance pretty rapidly to the defence of his niece. He could hardly believe that she would lend herself, in any way, to help work out an evil destiny for him.

"If I know anything of Elizabeth, Susan," he said quickly, "she would soon let Mr. Leeper know he was making a considerable mistake, if he spoke to her on this subject."

"I cannot pretend to say what Elizabeth might do," answered Mrs. Mainwaring rather stiffly. She was now and then somewhat jealous of her husband's

confidence in his niece. "I only know that this report is annoying—most annoying to me."

"Well," said the Rector, influenced by three considerations—first, by the hopelessness of fighting against his fate, however unpleasant that fate might be; secondly, by the sense that he and his wife were beginning to tread on rather dangerous ground; and thirdly, by a growing desire for his hot bath—"Well, it is a nuisance; but I daresay people will forget the whole thing in a few days. I daresay Mrs. Adnitt made the most of it.—There, I really am so stiff I must go. Don't vex yourself about it, Susie, any more. I'll think it over, and we'll talk about it some other time. Oh! by the way," he added, turning back for a moment, just as he was going out of the study door, "can't we have dinner a quarter of an hour sooner?"

CHAPTER III.

"L'opinion dispose de tout. Elle fait la beauté, la justice, et le bonheur, qui est le tout du monde."

MRS. FRANK LORIMER was not naturally of a patient disposition; and when the progress of events was not altogether as rapid as she desired, she had a strong inclination to help it forward with a private shove. She thoroughly enjoyed the exercise of personal power which she was sensible of in thus hurrying conclusions; and, having an ingenious mind, she generally found convincing arguments for proving that her interference was both necessary and legitimate. It is a great temptation to women of a certain temperament to play freely with the souls of their acquaintances, and to try to force the hand of destiny concerning them. By carefully ignoring the tricks they lose, and rather ostentatiously counting up those they take, these good ladies contrive generally to create, both in their own minds and in the minds of the onlookers, an impression of continuous and remarkable success in the playing of their rather dangerous game.

Mrs. Frank Lorimer had watched the course of Elizabeth and Fred Wharton's friendship with sincere

interest. It had supplied a certain element of refined excitement in her daily life which she relished keenly. She had continually been aware of the situation, she expected it would develop: but though Wharton seemed to be growing somewhat preoccupied, and though Elizabeth, at times, was restless and capricious, Mrs. Frank had candidly to confess that the situation did not develop appreciably. She began to get a little impatient. It seemed to her they must have drunk the cup of friendship pretty well to the dregs; and she was convinced that, in the case of a friendship between a man and a woman, love is at the bottom of the cup, just as surely as Truth is at the bottom of the proverbial well. Mrs. Frank wanted something to happen; she really quite yawned for a change of scene.

No sooner had she fairly acknowledged her own sense of *ennui* in face of the present state of things, than the most excellent reasons for doing her best to alter that state of things began to crowd in upon her. For some time past she had been conscious that Elizabeth's intimacy with Fred Wharton had provoked a good deal of comment. People observed rather curiously upon the fact that whenever they called upon Elizabeth Lorimer, "that young Mr. Wharton was sure to be there." One or two people had asked Mrs. Frank point-blank whether there was "anything in it;" and, when she answered in a vague and airy manner, had put up their eyebrows with an appearance of slight surprise. One excellent and well-intentioned old lady, who affected propriety as decidedly as she relished scandal, had intimated

so undisguisedly that she considered the connection a peculiar one, that Mrs. Frank felt a growing conviction regarding the absolute duty of prompt interference.

Fanny Lorimer had decided long ago that Elizabeth must marry again. She had gone further, and decided that she must marry Fred Wharton; she thought they would suit admirably, and be very happy together. Elizabeth's superfluous enthusiasms would be nicely moderated by Wharton's philosophic calm; while he would be stimulated to greater earnestness of purpose by his wife's strong and ardent sympathies. It was a charming arrangement undoubtedly; and there was just that spice of malice about the conception of it, which made it specially attractive to Fanny Lorimer's mind. She could not forgive Wharton's apparent indifference to love and marriage; his perfect immunity from all those daily cares and vexations, which seem to be the necessary result of the close relationship of two imperfect human creatures. She felt it would be wonderfully refreshing to reduce him to the ordinary level; to see him chained to the oar like the rest of us; to hear him crying out that the shoe pinched, now and then; to watch him hopping mildly about with clipped wings, instead of flying gaily hither and thither as fancy fired. She was sensible that Wharton clearly perceived the limitations and shortcomings of her own character; and though she liked him very well—in a way,—she never could forgive him this keenness of insight. It would be extremely exhilarating to get the better of him for once.

She was just a little bit afraid of Elizabeth; if the progress of events was to be hastened, and the hand of destiny to be forced, Fanny Lorimer felt she dared not attempt to attain her end by means of Elizabeth. If she was to administer a shove to the situation, it must be administered through Fred Wharton. Yet, with all her audacity, she did not quite care to undertake the business single-handed. She would like, if possible, to be backed by her husband's approval.

Now unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—Frank Lorimer hated diplomacy. He cultivated the very erroneous notion—so it appeared to his wife—that every one really knew his, or her, own business best. He strongly objected to interfering. He objected both to the trouble and to the responsibility of interfering: but he had a deeper feeling on the subject, as well, and one which Fanny Lorimer was perhaps hardly capable of appreciating. He had a certain reverence for the mysterious individuality of each human being, which made it seem to him almost sacrilegious to attempt to arrange or modify the future in any way for them. Frank Lorimer was not what is generally understood by the term "a religious-minded man"—far from it: but he believed deeply in a kind, and yet awful Providence, which shapes the life of every man, and he feared to run counter to the purposes of that tremendous power with any impertinent and short-sighted plans and fancies of his own.

Fanny Lorimer's pretty little head was full of schemes for the silencing of adverse criticism, the

subduing of Fred Wharton, and the settling of all difficulties regarding Elizabeth by means of this marriage, one evening when she and her husband were—for a wonder—dining alone together. That afternoon she had been a good deal disturbed by the questions concerning her sister-in-law's relations with Wharton, that had been put to her by different people. She had quite persuaded herself that the present state of things could not be permitted to go on. She saw clearly that something really must be done at once; but she wanted her husband's sanction for the doing of it; and she knew that, under the circumstances, it would be safer to try to obtain his sanction by a little management than to ask for it openly.

The parlour-maid had just left the room, and Frank was refreshing himself with a peaceful cigarette before going upstairs. He and his wife were sitting opposite to each other: but there was a large flowering plant in the centre of the table which acted as a pretty effectual screen between them. Fanny Lorimer, having a delicate mission to perform, regarded this as a not wholly unfortunate circumstance.

"I am rather worried about Elizabeth, Frank," she began quietly.

"Why?" he inquired. "I'm sure she was looking uncommonly well when I saw her the day before yesterday."

"Oh yes! perfectly well in health," answered Fanny Lorimer, drawing a little pattern slowly on the white table-cloth with the blade of her silver dessert knife. "She's quite well, but she is moody and uncertain. I'm not surprised," she added after

a moment—as Frank did not answer—looking up with a charming air of candour which, owing to the intervening plant, was unfortunately lost upon her husband. "I don't wonder at it the least; any nice woman would be moody in her position. I never supposed she could exist for very long merely on blue china and ideas."

"I wish you'd let the children come down to dessert, Fanny," remarked Frank rather complainingly. "I don't see them all day because I'm out, and then in the evening I'm always told they're in bed and asleep."

"Well, if you insist on dining at a quarter to eight, Frank," she answered with some decision, "you can't expect to have the children at dessert. Imagine how wretchedly pasty Nini would look if she sat up till this hour! Next to a lot of money, a good complexion is the best fortune in the world for a girl. Nini's complexion shan't be spoilt for want of sleep, any way, I'm determined."

"It's a bore, all the same," said Frank, turning his chair sideways so as to lean one elbow on the table, and stretching his legs out comfortably before him.

This change of position on his part prevented the plant acting so effectually as a screen: but Fanny Lorimer was not wanting in courage, nor was she easily turned from any purpose that she had set her mind on.

"I really almost wish sometimes," she said, bending her head down, while she carefully elaborated the pattern on the table-cloth—"I really do quite wish sometimes that Elizabeth would marry again."

Frank Lorimer glanced up quickly, with a touch of displeasure on his pleasant, good-looking face.

"It is hardly two years since Robert died, Fanny," he said. "It would be rather soon, don't you think?"

"Oh! pray don't imagine I like second marriages," she said, looking up too, and speaking rapidly. "You know perfectly well, Frank, that I think them absolutely detestable—only allowed for the hardness of our hearts, you know. But then Elizabeth has got no children, you see, and no near relations except ourselves and those tiresome, narrow-minded, old Mainwarings."

She paused a moment, and then added with a certain touch of unwillingness, which was very becoming:—

"And Elizabeth is rather peculiar, too; she is not quite careful enough; she makes people talk about her. Really, you know, Frank, your friend Mr. Wharton is always there; and of course people can't help observing it."

Frank Lorimer was silent. The conversation was thoroughly distasteful to him. He felt a little irritated with his charming wife; and yet, in fairness, he had to admit that there might be a good deal of truth in what she said.

Fanny Lorimer added a few flourishes to her pattern on the table-cloth. She wanted her last remarks to have time to sink well down into her husband's mind.

"Do you want Fred to marry her then?" asked Frank rather sharply at last. He did not look, somehow, as if he relished the idea at all.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered, with a delicate shrug of her shoulders. "It wouldn't be much use wanting Mr. Wharton to marry anybody, you know. He likes to drift. He hates taking steps; proposing to Elizabeth would be taking a great step, I fancy. But still his being there so much is annoying. It leads to all sorts of misconceptions. It really is rather compromising for Elizabeth, you know."

Fanny Lorimer said the last few words with a delightful little air of sorrowful conviction.

This was very unpleasant, Frank thought, if it really was true. Wharton had been a great deal at Elizabeth's lately, he knew; therefore he was afraid it might be true. Frank Lorimer disliked unpleasant things immensely; he always tried to avoid any lengthened discussion of them. He got up hastily, knocking the long ash of his cigarette off on to the carpet. This caused Fanny Lorimer an instant of acute misery; but she dominated her domestic sensations with heroic fortitude. The carpet must be sacrificed, she felt, to the situation.

"If it's really compromising, some one ought to tell him so," Frank said.

"Do you mean that, really, Frank?" asked his wife, getting up too, and letting the handle of her dessert knife fall with a gentle thud upon the tablecloth.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered testily. "For goodness' sake, Fanny, let the subject alone and we'll go upstairs."

Fanny Lorimer was absolutely delightful during the rest of the evening. Her husband imagined she

was prettily repentant for having introduced disagreeable subjects of conversation after dinner; and thought it very nice that she should have such a tender conscience where his comfort was concerned. One really has a great respect for the Serpent sometimes. He must have been wonderfully subtle to have beguiled Eve; or else the first woman must have been curiously less acute than her daughters of the last few centuries! Frank Lorimer was beautifully innocent of his wife's intentions; and Fanny Lorimer was radiant, for she saw a clear path before her.

Fortune is said to favour the brave. Fortune certainly in this case favoured Mrs. Frank Lorimer. In the usual course of events she did not often find herself alone with Mr. Wharton; but it so happened that, within a week after the above conversation, she had an excellent opportunity for administering just that little impetus to the forward movement of events that she had so earnestly coveted.

She called one afternoon at her sister-in-law's, wishing to make some arrangement regarding the entertaining of one or two friends. Martha, in answer to her inquiries, announced that Elizabeth was not at home; she would not be in for half an hour or so. But, Martha added, Mr. Wharton, who was also anxious to see her mistress, was awaiting her return upstairs. Here, then, was Fanny Lorimer's opportunity; all the circumstances perfectly arranged, the path smoothed for her, and—supposing Elizabeth did not return sooner than she was expected to—the most admirable occasion for

her to express her sisterly fears to Fred Wharton. Fanny Lorimer, of course, was glad; and yet she could not disguise from herself that she felt a little nervous. However, after a moment's indecision, she concluded that she could never respect herself again if she gave way to vague alarms, and retired from the performance of this, her obvious duty. She, too, would wait for Elizabeth's return.

"I know my way; you need not trouble to come up with me," she said graciously to Martha. Then she walked quietly upstairs, and went, unannounced, into the drawing-room.

Fred Wharton was beguiling the time, during which he waited for his fair hostess, by playing. The piano had been placed in the back drawing-room, and was in a position which, even had he been less absorbed in his present occupation, would have prevented his seeing Mrs. Frank as she came into the room. She, on her part, wanted a few minutes for quiet reflection; she wanted to arrange the manner of her attack. She felt that some people might think her just a trifle mean for taking advantage of Wharton's musical enthusiasm in this way: but the end, surely, might very well justify the means. She settled herself in a comfortable corner and waited patiently for the music to cease before she should speak. The *portière* between the two rooms was partly drawn aside, and by leaning a little forward Mrs. Frank could just see Wharton as he sat at the piano.

As we have already noted, Wharton's nature always seemed to grow deeper and more earnest

when he was playing. On this occasion, owing perhaps to certain new feelings which were beginning to stir within him, perhaps only to the fact that he believed himself to be alone and unobserved, he seemed to be speaking the very depths of his being out in the music.

Fortunately Fanny Lorimer's nature was not easily influenced by outbursts of feeling, otherwise she might easily have forgotten her purpose while listening to Wharton's stormy playing, and have lost herself on an ocean of fancy and of wild desire for some fair and unknown good. Fanny Lorimer had a small head, but she contrived never to lose it; consequently she just sat still and matured her little plans, with a fine indifference to her surroundings.

Suddenly Wharton left off abruptly in the middle of a tempestuous passage, and, after playing a few chords softly, fell to humming the melancholy song that had so overset Elizabeth the first time she heard it. He sang the words of the last verse out loud, with a certain quiet suggestion of regret and sorrow that almost startled Mrs. Frank. She had not a very delicate sense of honour, but there was a touch of self-revelation in Wharton's singing, which seemed to her clearly not intended for unsympathetic ears. It made her uncomfortable; she did not like to listen any longer; also, she began to be afraid that Elizabeth might come back, and that her opportunity would be lost. She managed to get up with a great rustling of skirts, half overset her chair, and save it hastily from actually falling, with a rapid

movement, and sharp little exclamation, which effectually attracted Wharton's attention.

He turned round quickly, expecting to see Elizabeth; and his face did not take an altogether agreeable expression when he perceived who it was that had interrupted him.

"Ah, my dear Mr. Wharton, forgive me!" cried Mrs. Frank, coming towards him with an outstretched hand and one of her peculiarly brilliant smiles. "I am so accustomed to running in and out of this house, without any parade of servants announcing me, that I came in quietly just now, and I'm afraid I have taken you by surprise. I really could not interrupt you at first, you were playing so deliciously. That tiresome chair nearly fell over. Ah!" she added, advancing towards the piano, "what lovely flowers."

On the top of the piano lay a great bunch of white roses, stephanotis, and lilies of the valley. Mrs. Frank put out her hand, picked up the bouquet, and almost buried her pretty face among the clustering blossoms.

"Ah! how perfectly delicious they are," she said. "Are they destined for my fortunate sister-in-law?"

"Mrs. Lorimer is very fond of white flowers," said Wharton rather loftily.

He had an uncomfortable sense of being taken at a disadvantage somehow. He had been feeling a little excited; and just because he so very seldom felt really excited he had a difficulty in regaining his usual calm manner, getting his social armour

on again, and meeting Mrs. Frank with weapons as sharp, and yet as dainty, as her own, in the battlefield of ordinary conversation. He had an absurd misgiving that something unpleasant was impending; and that he would not find himself equal to the occasion.

"Oh! they are perfectly delicious," said Mrs. Frank, smelling the flowers again. "Have you any idea, Mr. Wharton, when Elizabeth will be in?"

"She will be in in time for tea, I suppose," answered Wharton.

He was rather offended with Mrs. Frank Lorimer; and there was something uncomfortable, to his thinking, in the way she seemed to take for granted that he knew all about Elizabeth's movements.

"That won't be just yet," said Mrs. Frank. Then she added, looking up at him with an air of admirable candour, "I am very glad we have met here, Mr. Wharton, for I really wanted to see you very much."

Wharton did not feel inclined to make a pretty speech, so he merely bowed his acknowledgments of her complimentary desires. A silent bow from a person one knows very well is hardly an encouraging thing: but Mrs. Frank was apparently by no means abashed.

"It may sound very strange," she continued, "but I wanted to say something to you about my sister-in-law. It may seem unusual, but then you know her so very well. I think you will understand my motives."

Wharton was standing near the piano, with his

back to the window; Mrs. Frank was opposite to him, with the light falling full upon her. Somehow he mistrusted the expression of her innocent little face; and he disliked her taking possession of his offering of white flowers, and holding them so composedly in her hand while she talked to him. Wharton had a fanciful feeling upon him that she would keep those flowers, and that he should never give them to Elizabeth after all.

There was a pause. Fanny Lorimer began arranging her bonnet-strings with one hand. This occasioned her to turn her head a little on one side, so that she no longer looked her companion full in the face.

"My sister-in-law's position is such a peculiar one," she went on, after a minute or two. "She is so young, and so unusually handsome; and of course people observe her a good deal, and talk about her. People will say odious unpleasant things about every one, and of course she doesn't escape. I really do wish sometimes, Mr. Wharton, you know, that Elizabeth would be just a little more careful and conventional."

Wharton had not the smallest desire to discuss Elizabeth thus.

"Mrs. Lorimer is perfectly capable of taking care of her own reputation, I should imagine," he said stiffly.

"Ah no, there you're mistaken," answered Mrs. Frank quickly; and there was something so entirely straightforward and genuine in her manner as she spoke, that Wharton felt considerably mollified to-

wards her. "It is stupid, cold-hearted, worldly-minded creatures like me who are perfectly capable of taking care of their own reputations. Elizabeth really is too simple, and honest, and noble-hearted, to think what people will say about her, when she does this or that. She is too innocent; and the consequence is that she lands herself in all manner of bothers. She has ideas, you know, about life, and ideas are always fatal. The world seems to me," added Mrs. Frank, giving a final little pat to her bonnet-strings and looking straight in front of her abstractedly,—"the world seems to me to be divided into clever people with ideas and stupid people without them;—and the latter have to spend three parts of their time in fishing the former out of their difficulties. I need not say I belong to the stupid section, and"—she looked up at Wharton suddenly—"I am absolutely on thorns about my sister-in-law just now."

"Really, indeed," said Wharton coldly, "why?"

Mrs. Frank Lorimer stepped aside into the shadow of the heavy window curtains. She was going to play her highest card, and it made her feel a little nervous; she was afraid of appearing too much interested or excited. Wharton, she felt sure, was watching her carefully. She knew that with some men what she was about to say would have exactly the contrary effect to that which she desired to produce: but she trusted to an almost quixotic strain of honour which she had observed once or twice in Wharton. He would rather do anything than lose the least jot or tittle of his self-respect.

"I will tell you why," she said, smelling the flowers again; "and I shall have to say something extremely disagreeable. I shall offend your taste horribly. I really doubt whether you will ever forgive me: but I must consider Elizabeth, you know."

She paused—it really was an odious thing to say. She wondered what Wharton would do?—she wondered what Frank would think?—fortunately he would only hear her version of the story,—Wharton would be very certain not to mention it!

"In point of fact, then, you come here too often, Mr. Wharton," she said.

There are moments when it is quite impossible to maintain an appearance of philosophic calm. Wharton was pretty well master of himself on most occasions: but just now he could not manage to conceal his feelings. He blushed violently, and that added most materially to his sense of anger and wretchedness.

Mrs. Frank Lorimer did not give him time to speak.

"Yes," she said quickly, looking at him with an air of becoming distraction, and stretching out her hands—flowers and all—with a charmingly appealing gesture. "It is a horrible thing to say to you. You can never forgive me. I have outraged your taste, I know, and entirely disgusted you. But then people will talk, and there is nobody to tell you but me. Speaking is forced upon me—I really cannot help myself."

"This is extremely painful," said Wharton. "I

am more than sorry that I should have caused you any annoyance, or in any way—really it is too unpleasant," he added angrily, turning away.

"Pray, pray remember," cried Mrs. Frank hastily, coming a step nearer to him, and speaking imploringly,—"pray remember that Elizabeth knows nothing of all this,—is absolutely ignorant of it. She positively knows nothing of it."

Wharton stood looking down. Perhaps he had never felt so thoroughly uncomfortable in all his life before. He had been trying delicate and philosophic experiments as he supposed; and the world at large was accusing him, all the while, of an ordinary stupid bit of indiscretion. The position seemed to him intolerably vulgar. He felt enraged with himself, enraged with Fanny Lorimer, enraged with the whole universe. He had got entangled—yes, that was what people were saying—with Mrs. Lorimer. He could fancy the way this and that and the other person talked him over, and laughed, as they each added their little quota of gossip to the heap. And he had always kept himself so free of this sort of thing. Oh, it really was too odious! Heavens and earth, what a fool he had been, and what a wretchedly commonplace scrape he had got himself into!

Just then Elizabeth came in from her walk. Mrs. Frank and Wharton heard her shut the front door, and come lightly and quickly up the stairs. They stood together, in the shady back drawing-room, with its soft dusky colours and quaint furniture, feeling like two suddenly discovered conspirators.

CHAPTER IV.

"Looking up, I saw it was a starling hung in a little cage.—'I can't get out, I can't get out,' said the starling."

ELIZABETH certainly looked very handsome as she came into the room. She still wore nothing but black: but within the last few months she had taken to dressing in a rather superb manner. This afternoon she had been paying some visits, and was arrayed in a gown of some rich material, loaded with shimmering jet trimmings, which glanced and glittered as she moved. Her mantle—fitting tightly over the shoulders and showing the lines of the bust —matched her gown, and was bordered with deep, soft, black fur. She had on a little fluffy French bonnet, tying with broad strings under the chin, —the extreme becomingness of which had thrown Fanny Lorimer into a small ecstasy of envy and admiration the first time she saw it. Perhaps Elizabeth's style of dress was more suitable to a woman of forty than to a girl of barely four-and-twenty: but it had the effect of making her look younger, and not older, than her real age.

Mrs. Frank had a gift for receiving rapid impres-

sions. She glanced up at her sister-in-law as she entered the room, and said to herself—

"Certainly Elizabeth is wonderfully distinguished looking."

Wharton glanced up at her too. He was sensible of a sharp feeling of longing and regret. He was not at all under the impression that he was what is technically called "in love" with Elizabeth Lorimer,—he was utterly uncertain about the future: —but he knew that their pleasant friendship was at an end, any way. Mrs. Frank had just given it its *coup de grâce.* Nothing, absolutely nothing, could put things back on their old easy footing again.

Wharton had nothing to say; he stood silent, feeling contemptibly wretched. Fanny Lorimer was the first to regain her presence of mind, and moved forward to meet her sister-in-law with a rather unnecessarily brilliant smile.

Elizabeth, quite unconscious of all the plots against her peace, took Mrs. Frank's hand, and then turning to Wharton, said cordially—

"How nice of you both to wait for me. What delicious flowers, Fanny; where did you get them? Oh, you've been playing," she added, turning again to Wharton; "have you brought that thing of Schumann's you promised me? Come into the other room and let us have some tea, and then you shall play it to me. I really want refreshment; I have been paying such a lot of tiresome visits."

Elizabeth began unfastening her mantle as she spoke. She stood there looking very sweet and gracious in her shimmering dress.

"I'm afraid I can't stay now," said Wharton hastily, and—he knew it only too well—awkwardly, without looking at her.

Elizabeth opened her eyes rather wide with surprise, and paused, holding the half-unfastened fronts of her mantle in either hand. She was arrested by something unusual in Wharton's manner; it was so unlike him to refuse to do anything that she asked him to do.

"I ought really to have gone before," said he again. And then added vindictively, "I should have gone before, but that I have been so enchained with Mrs. Frank Lorimer's delightful conversation."

Fanny Lorimer winced a little; this was the form his resentment was going to take, then!

"I am afraid I must go," repeated Wharton, looking at Elizabeth almost sadly.

"How very odd," she said, with a sudden sense of chill and discomfort. "You have waited for me till now, and then, directly I come in, you rush away in this strange fashion."

Elizabeth went on unfastening her mantle.

"Pray don't let us detain you," she added rather stiffly.

"You can't know how sorry I am that I am obliged to go, Mrs. Lorimer," said Wharton impetuously and rather incoherently.

But he offered no further explanation, and Elizabeth shook hands with him coldly. She was annoyed; she could not understand it all.

Fanny Lorimer had turned away, and was fidgeting with some loose music on the piano. She was

in a small fever of vexation. Wharton seemed to her to be behaving with a wretched want of presence of mind. What would be the upshot of it? Had she, after all, made a great mistake?

There was a pause. Fanny Lorimer heard Wharton shut the door; and then as Elizabeth flung down her mantle, with a rustle of silk and clash of beads, she turned round.

"What is the matter with him, Fanny?" said Elizabeth hastily. She looked disturbed and bewildered.

"Oh, my dear, I suppose. he has moods, and fads, and fancies, like the rest of us," answered Mrs. Frank, coming forward and shrugging her shoulders with a touch of irritation. "Pray don't require reasons from me for the eccentric doings of the young men of our acquaintance, for I own myself quite incapable, as a rule, of discovering any. The ways of man are utterly incomprehensible, in my humble opinion."

Fanny Lorimer certainly felt better when she had delivered herself of this attack on mankind in general. If circumstances will not allow of your actually injuring an obnoxious individual, there is always a distinct degree of comfort to be derived from throwing a few stones at the whole race. Fanny Lorimer could have found it in her heart to run red-hot bodkins into Wharton at this moment: but, as there are prejudices against such practical expressions of personal feeling in the present day, she refreshed herself with a little general abuse of his sex. Then she looked up quite serenely at Elizabeth, and said—

"By the way, I believe he brought these flowers for you, Elizabeth. I picked them up while we were talking; and then, either I forgot to give them back to him, or he forgot to ask for them; any way, here they are."

Elizabeth glanced at the flowers for a moment, as Mrs. Frank held them out to her.

"I think you had better keep them," she said. "They seem to belong to you more than to me. And they are really too sweet, they make the room quite oppressive. No, I don't want them," she added.

Fred Wharton was in a very unenviable state of mind as he left Mrs. Lorimer's house and walked slowly home towards Chelsea. He had a conviction that some of the pleasantest days of his life were over for ever. He regretted the past; he was acutely uncomfortable in the present; and he distrusted the future. It was a miserable predicament for a young man, who had been wont to pride himself on his perfect serenity of mind and on the delightful security of his position, to find himself in.

Wharton meditated upon the situation all that evening: but, look at it which way he might, there was a lion in the path. On every side he seemed beset with dangers and difficulties. He felt he could not meet Elizabeth again until he knew his own mind and had decided on some positive plan of action. On the other hand, it was almost impossible to remain in London without meeting her. And she, at least, had not done him any wrong; how could he neglect and avoid her, without giving the slightest reason for his conduct? Finally, he decided

on the safe but unheroic course of running away. He felt he must have time to think the matter calmly out; he entirely refused to be hurried towards any premature conclusion. So next morning he telegraphed to a bachelor friend in Sussex, who had a delightful house, and a delightful habit of letting his guests do very much what they pleased, without making any too strenuous efforts at entertaining them. Wharton telegraphed to this convenient individual, saying that he was out of sorts and "wanted a rest;" and receiving a prompt reply from Adolphus Carr—the friend in question—to the effect that he would be entirely welcome, he set off without further delay.

He had cherished a sort of hope that once away from London, and from the observant eyes of his friends and acquaintances, he should find his difficulties melt away. He had a sort of hope that the windy March weather, the great stretches of turf-clad down, with that delicate strip of silver sea on the southern horizon, would act as a moral tonic upon him, and fill him with clear and distinct desires and resolutions. But he was disappointed. Nature seemed curiously indifferent to the perturbations and distresses of this pleasant young gentleman, with his philosophic and imaginative temperament, his questionings and uncertainties, and his charmingly furnished rooms down in Chelsea. She was altogether too busy with storm and sunshine, and the mysterious processes of birth, and growth, and failure, and death, and decay, to have any spare time to read him private lessons of fortitude or wisdom. She is

no respecter of persons, indeed, and seems to care no more tenderly for the needs of the most talented of her human children, than for the grass and daisies they thoughtlessly crush under their feet.

Perhaps Wharton looked at the position with unnecessary seriousness: but he had always been so engaged in watching other people that he had, so far, done very little living on his own account. As Mrs. Frank said, he hated taking steps; and he doubly hated being forced by outside opinion to take them. If only things had been left alone, Wharton thought, they would have arranged themselves: but to propose to Elizabeth Lorimer because certain busybodies chose to say that he ought to do so, seemed to him utterly monstrous. All his old objections to marrying came upon him with overwhelming force. He liked Elizabeth Lorimer immensely; liked her better, he owned to himself, than he had ever liked any woman before: but then he liked so many other things as well,—his friends, his freedom, his art. If he only liked Elizabeth either rather more or rather less, it seemed to him that he should know better what to do. As it was, he turned the matter this way and that, over and over again, and found himself as far from a decision as ever.

Wharton's very mental acuteness made him cowardly and uncertain. The possible results of every plan of action fairly frightened him. He had no instinct to fall back upon; it was all a weighing, and balancing, and measuring of probabilities, and possibilities, and desirabilities, without any strong and compelling current of feeling to draw or drive him

in any particular direction. His mental compass seemed to be depolarised; the needle no longer swung true. He wanted supremely to do what was right and honourable: but for the life of him, he could not see exactly which course right and honour commanded him to adopt.

A simpler-minded man, like Mr. Mainwaring, or —in a lesser degree—like Frank Lorimer, would have asked himself one or two straightforward questions and abided by the result. Had he really compromised the young lady, Frank would have asked himself, and if so what must he do? Obviously give her an opportunity of refusing him, to put the matter in a modest form. And if she accepted him?—Well, after all, whether he wanted to marry or not, chance would have provided him with a very charming wife; he must be thankful, and put his predilections for celibacy in his pocket.

But Fred Wharton could not approach the matter in this direct way. He had lost his sense of distinct light and shade, so to speak, in his observation of local colour. He objected to talking about right and wrong; right and wrong, to his seeing, were modified and blended by a thousand side-lights and accidents of position, which made it impossible fairly to disentangle them. He was so anxious to see Truth from every point of view, that he spent all his time in revolving round and round her, changing his standing-ground continually; instead—like a practical man—of clutching boldly at the nearest fold of her flowing garments, and holding on to that determinedly. In short, like nearly all highly sensi-

tive and imaginative persons, Wharton, having for a moment lost his mental balance, was disposed entirely to mistake the relative value of things; and while he was engaged in sedulously straining at a gnat, ran great risk of swallowing a whole caravan of camels.

Behind all these other feelings, there lingered an absurd but haunting idea that in marrying Elizabeth he would be spoiling a great artistic effect. He did not like to think of her settling down and assuming the *rôle* of an ordinary respectable commonplace matron. It seemed to him that she would lose a great deal of her charm under those circumstances. He had accepted Mrs. Frank's notion concerning Elizabeth, as has already been mentioned. He had been waiting and looking out for a long time for a dramatic *dénouement;* and he could not help feeling that Elizabeth would be somewhat of a fraud if the *dénouement* did not come off. She seemed to him cut out for some striking, perhaps tragic, situation; and he thought it would certainly be a loss to have her sink down to the usual dead level of womanhood. On the other hand, there would be something rather distracting about a wife who might develop suddenly any day and surprise you immensely. It seemed to Wharton a little like undertaking a Jack-in-the-box with an insecure fastening, and he could not imagine any possession less conducive to domestic peace and security.

These and a dozen more puzzling thoughts occurred to Wharton, as he wandered over the short-cropped turf of the chalk downs in the blustering March weather. At last, when nearly three

weeks had passed away, he began to be aware that his position and attitude of mind were rapidly becoming extremely ludicrous. This state of things could not go on for ever. Adolphus Carr was expecting a houseful of people, and Wharton was sensible that he was just a little in the way. As both reason and desire refused to lead him, he determined to fall back on what undevout persons call "chance," and devout ones call Providence. He would go back to London; perhaps some unlooked-for contingency—perhaps the mere sight of Elizabeth might make the way clear. Wharton did not wish to have too good a reason for laughing at himself; and he felt that his flight and long-continued state of uncertainty had an element of absurdity in them:—too, he remembered some drawing engagements that he could no longer neglect. He must hope that "something would turn up."

The rooms overlooking the river presented a very inviting appearance, after the chilly desolate country shivering in the cool embraces of early spring. Wharton's spirits rose. Something certainly, he thought, would turn up to help him out of his difficulties. Meanwhile events had been taking place in London which had considerably changed the aspect of Elizabeth Lorimer's affairs.

CHAPTER V.

"Comment, disaient-ils,
Enchanter les belles
Sans philtres subtils?"

THERE comes a moment in the history of the life of each of the saints, when Satan, baffled at all other points, makes one last and desperate assault upon the soul through the medium of the senses. St. Anthony could not escape from this trial in the burning solitude of the Egyptian desert, nor St. Francis amid the spotless purity of the Alpine snows nor St. Benedict in his cave among the cruel rocks and briers. Nor could poor Mr. Leeper escape it either, though he had a yellowish complexion and sparse black beard; and though he lived in this enlightened nineteenth century, when, as we know, "the sea of faith" is no longer "at the full," and we only listen—some sadly and some gladly—to "its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar," retreating "down the vast edges," and "naked shingles of the world."

Without asserting that Mr. Leeper, at this or any other stage of his career, deserved the honours of canonisation, we must allow that, having taken no small pains to form himself upon the orthodox models, he had a perfect right to suffer all the ortho-

dox temptations. It may be added that the natural man dies very hard in each one of us; perhaps fortunately, for if it had not always been so,—if the said natural man had not always been blessed with a considerable amount of vitality,—there is no saying in how many more wonderful vagaries the human race might not have already indulged, or how much farther away we might not have wandered, by this time, from our great mother Nature, and from the simple foundations of our humanity.

During the year and more that had passed since Elizabeth Lorimer left Claybrooke, Mr. Leeper had by no means ceased to think of the stately, gray-eyed, young lady with whom—from many points of view—a nearer connection appeared so desirable. Mr. Leeper's mind was of a very tenacious order. When he had once conceived an idea, it was pretty sure eventually to influence his action in some direct and practical way. His was not a poetical mind, in which a thousand and one charming and moving possibilities can float and float, like soft white clouds in a summer sky,—producing delicious effects of light and shade, but never precipitating themselves upon the sleepy land below in the positive, and often inconvenient, form of rain.

Among the distractions and annoyances of his parish work, during the constant struggle to communicate to his somewhat supine brother clergy a touch of his own superabundant enthusiasm, Mr. Leeper was often visited by thoughts of Elizabeth. His state of mind may be regarded from two points of view during this period,—of this fact he was

quite sensible himself, and, for some cause, it troubled him. The social and material advantages which a marriage with Elizabeth offered him seemed to sink more and more out of sight; while the attractive power of her beauty and charm of her manner waxed stronger and stronger. Memory played strange tricks upon Mr. Leeper. Little delicate flowers began to blossom in the rather neglected and arid region of his heart. He knew this, and it irritated him. Should he say that he was being tempted to fall away from the great work that he had proposed to himself,—was he indeed disposed to desert the Cause for love of one of the fair daughters of men? Or was he merely turning the more gentle and human side of his character, long hidden under hard deposits of ecclesiastical and social theory, towards the gracious sunlight? Mr. Leeper could not tell: but he knew that, for some strange reason, he would feel happier if he could be certain that he contemplated marriage in cold blood—if he could be sure that he wished to marry for the sake of the Cause rather than for the sake of the woman!

He was a really devout man. He believed that all his life was ordered for him. He depended very much on the leading of circumstances, not perceiving that circumstances, in the case of a strong nature, have a curious tendency to lead in the direction in which that nature desires to go. Mr. Leeper determined to wait, to give the matter time. He did not say—as Wharton said later in a somewhat analogous position—that "something would turn

up ;" he held that if it was to be, the way would be made clear by a higher power. So month after month had passed by, till, at last, quite unexpectedly, Mr. Leeper was offered a large parish in the active crowded manufacturing district which lies in the north of Midlandshire.

Two years before he would have clutched at the offer, simply because it promised to widen his sphere of action, to put him into a prominent position, and give him an opportunity of testing the working capacity of many of those theories which he so ardently cherished. Now another thought influenced him. He had waited patiently; this might be the looked-for leading of circumstance. He would have more to offer Elizabeth ; her money and position would be more than ever desirable for him ; and the prospect of wide influence and of self-devotion to a great practical good might be somewhat of a bait with which to tempt her. Alas, alas ! Mr. Leeper's eye was no longer single. He clung to the idea of a leading ; and yet he felt bitter against himself. Was it possible that, like the church of Ephesus, he had left his first love ?

When the news of Mr. Leeper's preferment got abroad, poor Mrs. Harbage naturally made a last and desperate attempt to secure her eldest daughter's future. Mr. Harbage, like Curtius of old, was compelled to leap into the gulf, and to find out clearly what his brother clergyman's state of mind and intentions might be. Unfortunately Mr. Harbage's self-sacrifice was not crowned with the same success as that of the ancient Roman. Mr. Leeper inti-

mated that such few affections as he was unwillingly sensible of possessing were altogether engaged elsewhere; and the gulf seemed to yawn, deeper and wider than ever, between the eldest Miss Harbage and matrimony.

Led by that vindictive instinct, which so often animates the heart of an affectionate mother when one of her children appears to be slighted, Mrs. Harbage immediately did her best to discover who was committing the unparalleled atrocity of engrossing Mr. Leeper's affections. The memory of former disappointments naturally beset her, and she instinctively fixed on Elizabeth Lorimer as the culprit. Mrs. Harbage loved to proclaim, if not her woes, at least the sins of others, which might in some measure be supposed to produce those woes. And so the rumour concerning Mr. Leeper and Mrs. Lorimer was set afloat, which eventually, as we have already seen, reached Claybrooke Rectory, and caused a very distinct amount of annoyance to its inmates.

Mr. Leeper could not actually contradict the rumour; nay, he was disposed to accept it as a part of the expected leading. He determined that, —as soon as the necessary formalities, regarding the leaving of his old parish and taking possession of his new one, had been accomplished,—he would go up to London and see the young lady whose image, for the last twelve months, had haunted him so constantly.

But having once given in to the pleasing notion that he was intended eventually to try his fortune with Elizabeth, Mr. Leeper became absurdly anxious

to see her as soon as possible. It was not without one or two struggles that he decided to postpone his visit till all business matters should be settled. Poor Mr. Leeper had been accustomed to obey his own commands unhesitatingly for a good number of years: but now his inclination seemed sadly disposed to rebel against his will. He was sensible of the rebellion, and it made him stern and imperious towards himself. Men of his nature seem almost to buy the right of being somewhat harsh to others, since they are so unsparing to themselves. Mr. Leeper did not love his neighbour with altogether apostolic fervour: but at times he absolutely hated himself—which, perhaps, failing the first, was the next best thing he could do.

It was on a soft dull afternoon towards the end of March, that Mr. Leeper found himself, at last, waiting on Mrs. Lorimer's doorstep,—one of those warm enervating days when spring seems to come upon us suddenly; deceptive days, tempting persons of a sanguine disposition to throw aside greatcoats, and believe that winter is altogether past,—followed too often, in our uncertain climate, by disappointment for the hopeful in the shape of weeks of black north-east wind.

London seemed very hot and stuffy after the bracing air of Midlandshire. Mr. Leeper was less vigorous than usual. The warm day made him feel a little limp. He was rather nervous too, and was aware that he was not in exactly the right state, either of mind or of body, for a great undertaking. He had not decided how much he meant to say to

Elizabeth Lorimer; he hoped again that circumstances would point the way for him. Few men feel at their best with the possibility of a proposal hanging over them, and Mr. Leeper felt decidedly uncomfortable at this moment.

Mrs. Lorimer was at home—so Martha told him. That excellent woman was somewhat moved at his advent. It was pleasant to her to see a familiar face from the Claybrooke neighbourhood, even though the owner of it was not held very dear at Claybrooke Rectory itself. She conducted Mr. Leeper upstairs with a considerable show of satisfaction, and brought him word that Mrs. Lorimer was engaged just then, but would be with him shortly.

It must be remembered that Mr. Leeper had been living quietly in a not particularly enlightened part of the country, for some years, and had by no means kept pace with the times in the matter of house decoration; therefore the appearance of Mrs. Lorimer's drawing-room struck him rather forcibly. The rich, mysterious colours of the carpets and hangings, the strange crowded pattern of the wall-paper, the quaintly-shaped furniture, the dusky blue covers of the chairs, the profusion of pretty, useless, unnecessary odds and ends—all surprised him a little. The room was filled with the delicious sweetness of a couple of flame-coloured azaleas, in full blossom, standing in large pots in the windows. There was a sense to him of unrestfulness, of too much meaning, in all this subdued colour, in this multitude of forms and patterns. He was strongly aware of

the charm of it all: but it was bewildering to him in a way. He almost recoiled from it.

Mr. Leeper was not quite himself this afternoon. He was easily affected. The room seemed to him a little dangerous, and even more enervating, to the moral and mental fibres, than the soft spring day outside. He hated to be influenced. He liked to dominate his surroundings; and as he looked round this room, with its luxurious decorations and sweetly-scented atmosphere, he became sensible that there was a risk of his surroundings dominating him. Mr. Leeper had starved his senses on high moral grounds; his senses seemed inclined to take their revenge on him, this afternoon. The memory of Elizabeth Lorimer's beauty grew stronger and stronger within him; he longed more than ever to see her. Yet he felt angry with himself, angry with her, distrustful of the leading. It seemed to him that, like Samson of old, he was being beguiled; his strength and his vigour were in danger of being stolen, hopelessly, yet deliciously, away from him by the fair daughter of the Philistines. Mr. Leeper's forehead crumpled itself up into very hard lines; and his tall, angular, black figure looked singularly out of place amid the dim richness of Elizabeth Lorimer's drawing-room.

He stood lost in a rather unpleasant reverie, when the soft dragging sound of a woman's dress on the carpet caused him suddenly to look round Elizabeth had come in through the other room, and was standing with one arm raised, pushing aside the heavy *portière.*

She was dressed in a long gown of black brocaded stuff. The material was soft, and hung in graceful folds as she stretched her hand up to draw back the curtain. She wore some handsome old lace, at her throat and wrists, of that delightfully harmonious shade of colour which inartistic persons are wont to say is the objectionable result of a want of good honest soap and water,—there are people, though, who in their adoration of cleanliness would wash the bloom off a peach before eating it, I believe! Elizabeth's brown hair was knotted low down at the back of her head, and curled a little about her forehead, lending a certain pretty tenderness to her face. Her appearance intensified the feelings with which Mr. Leeper was already troubled. She was certainly very beautiful. He enjoyed and yet almost regretted it.

All this, though long in the telling of it, occupied really but a few seconds of time. Elizabeth greeted her guest very graciously, while he, on his part, presented rather a disturbed and harassed countenance to her gaze.

"I did not know you were in London, Mr. Leeper," she said, smiling as she held out her hand to him.

"I have come up on business," he answered. "My stay is not likely to be a protracted one."

"Then it is all the more kind of you to take the trouble of coming to see me," said Elizabeth.

Mr. Leeper looked at her rather anxiously. It struck Elizabeth that there was an odd intensity and suggestion of suppressed excitement about his face

and manner. It was a little uncomfortable. But probably it meant nothing—she had not seen him for a long time; and meanwhile she had been living among people who were quite the reverse of intense. Mr. Leeper's visit was a matter of very secondary importance to Elizabeth. Her thoughts were much more occupied with the fact that she had made a disagreeable discovery regarding her banker's book, and that nothing had been heard or seen of Fred Wharton, since the day on which he had so abruptly left her.

"Won't you sit down?" she said, settling herself as she spoke in a low chair by the fireplace.

"I would rather stand, thank you," answered Mr. Leeper, with unnecessary precision.

Elizabeth felt a little bit bored. She leant back lazily in her chair, resting her elbows on the two arms of it, and holding up one hand to shield her face from the warmth of the smouldering fire. Mr. Leeper could not help observing the fine pose of her figure, and the graceful turn of her head as it rested against the dull blue chair-cover. He did not want to remark these things: but they were too strong for him, and he could not help it.

"I suppose everything is going on much as usual at Lowcote," said Elizabeth, feeling that she must find some subject of conversation.

"I believe so," answered Mr. Leeper shortly.

"Why, are you not just come from there?" she asked.

Mr. Leeper saw light: he wanted to talk about his prospects and his work; he fancied it would restore his equilibrium.

"No," he said, "I have left Lowcote, Mrs. Lorimer. I have a much larger and more interesting parish now. I was not sorry to leave Lowcote, I never had enough to do there."

"Ah no!" said Elizabeth. "I remember your telling me that. Where are you living now?"

"I have got a parish in the north of the county," he answered. "A manufacturing district is deeply interesting. I have an extended sphere of work and, I trust, of usefulness. The people, I think, will be far more intelligent and responsive than in a purely agricultural district. Personally," added Mr. Leeper, drawing himself up and looking more composed, and consequently more pleasing, than he had since Elizabeth entered the room, "personally, I feel deeply interested in, and very hopeful respecting the work before me,—but I shall want help."

"Oh, you are sure to find help," said Elizabeth, smiling. She rather liked Mr. Leeper when he became enthusiastic.

"You think so?" he asked quickly. "I trust I may, Mrs. Lorimer, for I shall want it. It is no mere pastime that I am undertaking, but a work to call out and develop all a man's powers and energies."

"That you will like," she said. "I fancy you haven't any gift for being lazy and merely sitting still."

"The parish has been very much neglected," Mr. Leeper went on. He wanted to fortify and brace himself with the thought of his work. "I shall have to reorganise the whole of the parochial machinery—or rather to create it, for at present it

can hardly be said to exist at all. I must raise money to build a mission-room. I want to establish a coffee-tavern with as little delay as possible, for I am afraid the drunkenness is terrible in the low-lying parts of the parish. And, finally, I must try to restore the church, and I must have bright hearty services which will be attractive to the people."

"You have plenty of work before you," said Elizabeth, smiling pleasantly. "I wish you all success in your undertakings."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lorimer," answered Mr. Leeper —then he paused a moment. "I wish," he added, looking at her earnestly, "that I could awaken a strong interest in your mind regarding my parish."

"I am very much interested in all you tell me," answered Elizabeth.

She felt that she ought to have a great respect for Mr. Leeper and his work. He certainly had higher aims, and devoted himself much more consistently to the good of his fellow-creatures, than any one else whom she knew. But Elizabeth was rather worried and rather dissatisfied. She was quite unequal to getting up a sudden enthusiasm for the improvement of Mr. Leeper's manufacturing parish. She felt wearied in face of his vigour and energy.— She let the hand, with which she had been shading her face from the fire, fall languidly down on to the arm of the chair. The movement was a slight one but it arrested Mr. Leeper's attention. Again it struck him how beautiful she was. He felt he was being hurried forward, and being compelled to speak more clearly than he had purposed doing.

"I have a very special reason," he said, "a very special reason for desiring to interest you in my future. You may not, perhaps, just now be able to estimate of what deep and vital importance your concurrence in my projects may be to me."

Elizabeth began to feel a little uncomfortable. There was a curious mixture of determination and entreaty about Mr. Leeper's manner.

"On two occasions," he continued, "when we have had some conversation together, you have given me an impression that if a life of—perhaps hard—but noble work and high endeavour were offered to you you would not reject it."

Elizabeth raised herself from her easy position and sat straight up, looking at Mr. Leeper with very wide-open eyes.

Mr. Leeper had tried to set his ideas in order; to think of the Cause; to magnify his work: but as Elizabeth, surprised and lovely, looked up wonderingly at him, all the feelings, which had assaulted him when he first came into the room, rushed in upon him with redoubled force. Not coffee-taverns, or church restorations, or bright services, touched Mr. Leeper's thoughts of the future with delight and glory. Alas! not the Cause, but the woman, drew him on.

He turned suddenly away and walked hastily across the room. Then coming back, and standing before Elizabeth, his face pale and working with emotion, he said hoarsely—

"Will you marry me, Mrs. Lorimer?"

"Good gracious, Mr. Leeper!" cried Elizabeth,

getting up quickly. She was amazed out of all common politeness by this wholly unexpected proposal. "I beg your pardon," she added, recovering herself rapidly; "you must excuse me. Your question has taken me so entirely by surprise."

"I cannot help myself," he said almost fiercely.

Then poor Mr. Leeper fell very low in his own estimation; he used the Cause as a stalking-horse, and he knew that it was ignoble.

"Think—pause—pray consider," he said, stretching out his hand with a warning movement. "Do not refuse a call to a noble work. Do not hastily put aside a chance of greatly benefiting others. You could do so much, Mrs. Lorimer. You might be a blessing to hundreds of poor, degraded, struggling creatures. With your beauty, your talents, your position, think of all that you might do. Surely, surely, these considerations must move you. Pray pause before you answer me."

There was something positively alarming in the desperate intensity of the man's manner, and in the earnestness of his words. Elizabeth felt that she was almost wicked in not pausing, at all events, as he asked her to. She stood with her hands clasped tightly together, trying to be quite calm, and to keep her eyes fixed steadily upon his face,—though her heart was beating so that she could not see him clearly.

"I have no desire to marry," she said, as quietly and distinctly as she could. "I have no intention of marrying—none. I am quite contented with my present circumstances. You must pardon my frank-

ness; this is a matter in which the simple truth is best."

There was a pause.

The passions of anger and love have a good deal in common. Mr. Leeper felt himself filled with a perfect volcano of righteous indignation. He forgot Samson; he took leave of the broad humanities of the Old Testament, and turned as bitterly upon the beautiful woman before him as St. Athanasius himself might have turned upon some fair wanton in Alexandria of old. The Fathers, we know, did a good deal of scolding at times.—He fancied that he was about to smite with the sword of the Lord; but, alas for the easiness of self-deception, he really smote with no nobler weapon than the stiletto of a disappointed lover.

"You reject it, then," he said bitterly; "reject all I offer you without a second thought. You reject high aims, an earnest life, a noble dedication of yourself to the good of the Church and of your fellow-creatures. It is a dangerous thing to do, Mrs. Lorimer. A thing that can hardly be done with perfect impunity. And what do you reject it for?" he added, looking contemptuously round the room. "For this! for luxury, and idleness, and curious furniture, and delicate hangings; for what pleases the eye merely, and leaves the heart vain and empty. You care only to sit here at your ease,—like Dives of old, to fare sumptuously every day, while the beggar lies at your gate full of sores,—while hundreds of men and women live the lives and die the deaths of mere brutes, and you will not stretch out a

finger to help them. Ah! it is you," he said, "and beautiful cold-hearted women like you, who are the ruin of our day! You take plain hard-working men captive, with your charm and your loveliness. You bewilder their eyes, you turn their minds from high purposes, you make them fall in their own self-respect, you bewitch and fascinate them, you play even at caring for their work, you pretend to sympathise with them; and then, in the end, you reject them,—you send them away with their hearts no longer honest, with their self-respect shattered, with the haunting knowledge that they are perjured in their own sight and in the sight of God. I have offered you a heroic life, and you——"

"Stop, stop," cried Elizabeth haughtily. She was too angry to reason, or protest, or justify herself. The very touch of truth in Mr. Leeper's violent discourse, where he called her life useless, vain, and empty, made her all the more resentful towards him. "You forget yourself strangely," she said. "You have not the faintest right to speak to me in this way. And understand," she added, with a cruel light in her eyes:—"understand, once and for all, it is not so much your work that I reject—I could easily, at moments even gladly perhaps, give myself to that. It is the condition with which it is offered to me that I reject. I absolutely reject you."

For a moment they stood looking at each other. Mr. Leeper seemed to shrink; he seemed to fall together somehow. He despised himself—which was far more painful to him than hating himself. There was no one point in the whole of this inter-

view that he could remember with satisfaction. He had deceived himself; he had been in the wrong from beginning to end; he had betrayed the Cause at first, and at last he had been almost insolent to this woman in her own house. His anger changed to shame. The nobler part of his nature asserted itself.

"I beg your pardon," he said simply. "I have made a great mistake."

And he turned away without another word and left her.

Mr. Leeper travelled back to North Midlandshire that night, a bitterly humiliated man. He was disappointed in his love, and that was bad enough, after his long waiting and thinking: but, worse still, he was disappointed in himself, for he had been both weak and unfaithful to what he held to be the highest good. Fortunately the care of some five or six thousand souls does not leave much time for brooding over any disaster, however great. Mr. Leeper flung himself into parish work with almost alarming vigour. He was a stern shepherd, and drove rather than led his flock into the ways of righteousness and temperance. He gained a reputation for determination, for dogmatism, for possessing, to a remarkable degree, the courage of his convictions. But though Mr. Leeper changed very little outwardly as time went on, he never quite, I fancy, forgot a certain enervating day late in March, a beautiful and scornful woman standing in a luxurious and strangely perfumed room, and teaching him a wholesome though unpleasant lesson respecting his own fallibility and shortcomings.

CHAPTER VI.

"Vain is the effort to forget."

THERE is generally a lively feeling of satisfaction in the remembrance of having played a difficult game and won it. I am afraid this satisfaction is not wholly amiable, and arises less from the thought of one's own skill than from joy at the painful discomfiture of one's opponent. When poor Mr. Leeper admitted his mistake, and retired humbled and worsted from the scene of action, Elizabeth was conscious of a certain proud pleasure. She rejoiced in his humiliation. But when the first heat of her anger against him died down, and she had time to think the matter over quietly, she became more sensible of having received, than of having administered, a pretty sharp rebuke.

For the last eighteen months she had been trying an experiment. By the rejection of various old elements in her life, and the careful fusing and mingling various new ones, she hoped to manufacture happiness. She anxiously watched the crucible; drew forth a little of its contents now and then to test them; added fresh ingredients; fanned her furnace fire into a flame, to try what more heat would do, and then let it smoulder and almost die

into white ashes, to see whether a lower temperature would be more efficacious:—but, though she waited and watched with admirable patience and constancy, the elements would not mingle somehow, and melt into the harmonious glow of true happiness. Elizabeth began to distrust the results of her experiment. She bent anxiously over her work, she applied herself to it more diligently than ever: but in her secret soul a wretched suspicion grew, ever stronger and stronger, that happiness can never be manufactured; that though all the kingdoms of the world and all the glory of them were passed through the alembic, yet not enough happiness could be distilled from them to satisfy the thirst of one frail human creature.

Mr. Leeper had come fearlessly into the mysterious gloom of her laboratory; and had told her—almost brutally—that her experiment would be a dead failure, and that her working at it was so much mere waste of time. Elizabeth had driven him out with flashing eyes and scornful words; yet the longer she thought over it, the more she feared that he had spoken the truth.

Wharton's disappearance had disturbed Elizabeth very much; more indeed than she cared to own, even to herself. She was almost alarmed at discovering—now that he was gone—what a large element his society, his music, and pleasant conversation, had represented in her scheme of happiness. She was annoyed at feeling his absence so much, and rather overplayed the part of entire indifference in consequence.

She had been restless and uncertain before, as Mrs. Frank Lorimer had not failed to note. These unpleasant symptoms were aggravated by Wharton's disappearance. Mrs. Frank observed them. They made her acutely uncomfortable. She asked herself, more than once, whether she had not made a fatal mistake. But she gave no hint to her husband or to the world, of the share she had had in producing the present aspect of affairs. Like the bad characters in the Psalms, Mrs. Frank Lorimer kept herself close, and like them hid much mental discomfort under a remarkably flourishing exterior.

Nor were these more subtle and subjective troubles the only ones which my poor Elizabeth had to struggle with at this period. There were others of a plain, obvious, and material character which caused her a good deal of anxiety. During the last year and a half she had spent a large sum of money. Decorating a house, after the sumptuous and fanciful manner of the present day, necessitates a considerable outlay. Then Elizabeth had expended a good deal upon her clothes. She had a natural tendency towards surrounding herself with the best of everything. Wharton had advised her to be charming and please her friends. She was charming; she was more—she was, in a way, magnificent. No doubt it is a most admirable thing to be magnificent: but unfortunately it costs a lot of money. Certainly she had not entertained much, so that the actual expenses of her housekeeping ought not to have been great; yet even in this department a good deal more had been

spent than was actually necessary. Elizabeth had been rather worried for some time, but by the end of March her financial position was such, that she perceived some very distinct change in her manner of living to be absolutely indispensable.

Frank Lorimer was his brother's executor, and was by way of managing Elizabeth's affairs for her. But, in point of fact, they had hardly ever mentioned money matters to each other. Frank had plenty of other things to do, and had troubled himself very little about his obligations in the matter; and Elizabeth always had a tendency to take her fate, rather forcibly, into her own hands.

It is never agreeable to allow, even to oneself, that one has been needlessly and foolishly extravagant. Still less is it agreeable to invite the criticism of another person in the matter. Elizabeth put off speaking to her brother-in-law as long as possible, though she had great confidence both in his ability and willingness to help her: but at last she had to admit that no other course was open to her. Not caring to include Mrs. Frank in her confidence—she had conceived a slight distrust of her charming sister-in-law lately—she wrote privately to Frank, enclosing various necessary papers and statements, and begging him to come the first evening he was at liberty and deliver his verdict on the situation.

Frank Lorimer was of a very reasonable temperament. As a rule, he had not the least inclination to quarrel with things as they are: but he had often felt it hard that the world had not been con-

stituted on some principle which would have rendered it unnecessary for him ever to have to say anything unpleasant to anybody. You may call this inherent sweetness of nature, or a lamentable want of moral courage, as you please. The more delicate virtues always run the risk of being included under the head of reprehensible weakness of character. Any way, Frank Lorimer found no righteous satisfaction in rebuking the erring brother. And rebuking the erring sister seemed to him, if possible, even more objectionable. He felt that Elizabeth had been very careless and extravagant: but he had not the smallest desire to tell her so. Consequently he arrived at her house, on the evening of the day following Mr. Leeper's stormy visit, with a sense upon him that he had a most ungracious duty to accomplish. He struggled to put off the evil moment of delivering his opinion on Elizabeth's expenses as long as possible, and took refuge in a little general conversation to begin with.

"I heard from Wharton this morning," he said, when their first greetings were over.

Frank stood with his back to the fire, in the attitude so natural to civilised man when he finds himself in the house of a near relation or intimate friend.

"It was only a line. He's gone down to Oakhurst—says he is gone there on business. That is really a refreshingly untruthful statement as coming from him. Fred's capacity for business is of the most primitive and rudimentary description, you know. I don't somehow understand it," he

added meditatively. "It seems to me he must have been very much put to it for an excuse before he would take refuge in talking of business, specially to me. I can't conceive why he's gone off just now. The country must be hideously chilly."

Elizabeth had been standing near him by the fire. As he spoke she moved away, and sitting down on a sofa near the window, began furling and unfurling a black and gold fan which hung at her side, with an appearance of considerable interest.

"Oh, business means drawings, I suppose," she answered, without looking up. "I daresay he's got some fresh orders. There are always a lot of people staying at Oakhurst. He may have arranged to meet Mrs. Ostler Westcott there. He began a drawing of her last season and never finished it."

"Yes, I know," remarked Frank. "Westcott offended him somehow, and he wouldn't go on with it. Westcott is rather a vulgar creature, I admit."

Elizabeth put up her eyebrows slightly.

"Isn't he sufficiently punished in the possession of such a universally attractive wife, poor man?" she said.

Frank shrugged his shoulders as apologising kindly for the shortcomings of the whole house of Westcott.

"She told me," Elizabeth continued, "one day, that she made it a rule always to go into retreat in Lent. I inquired where, and she said, 'Oh, at Oakhurst;' so she's sure to be there now."

"Pleasant for Adolphus Carr," said Frank, smiling. "Complimentary to find yourself and your

house regarded in the light of a practical renunciation of the world."

Elizabeth did not answer.

"If Wharton's gone to draw, why can't he just say so, though?" remarked Frank Lorimer after a moment's pause, contemplating the hearthrug with an air of mild suspicion. "I hate mysteries. Wharton used to be so charmingly unmysterious: but he's changed somehow lately. He is preoccupied. Sometimes he seems as if he had something on his mind. It is a great pity. It will be very depressing if Fred follows the multitude to do evil and becomes serious."

Elizabeth bent down over her fan, and diligently disentangled the silk threads of the tassel of it.

"Don't agitate yourself about him, Frank," she said. "Mrs. Ostler Westcott may be trusted to restore anybody to a most becoming state of frivolity."

Frank raised his eyes slowly from the hearthrug and looked at Elizabeth with a sensation of slight surprise. There was a suggestion of personal feeling in her way of speaking which he could not help remarking. He knew that most pretty women have a disposition to dislike each other: but he had fancied that Elizabeth was above that sort of thing. He was quite willing to admit that she was often too emotional, and even a little exaggerated: but he had never supposed her capable of small meannesses or social jealousies. Both her faults and her virtues were on the grand scale, he thought.

Elizabeth made a graceful picture, in the softly-shaded light of her quaint room, as she bent over

the tassel of her fan, with a pretty show of industry in the disentangling of it. As he looked at her, Frank thought: "She, at least, need not much fear comparison with any woman as far as beauty goes."

Frank had almost forgotten his unpleasant after-dinner conversation with his wife on the subject of Elizabeth and Wharton. It had taken place nearly three weeks before, and Frank made it a rule to forget unpleasant things as soon as possible.

Suddenly, as he stood looking at his sister-in-law, he remembered his wife's suggestion. What so natural as that Fred Wharton should fall in love with this charming woman? And—for Wharton was a delightful fellow—what so probable as that Elizabeth should in some degree return his affection?—Yet the notion was distinctly displeasing to Frank somehow. He quite acknowledged that it would be absurd to expect every young lady, who might have the misfortune to lose her husband at one-and-twenty, never to contemplate marrying again. It would be altogether too much to demand that all young widows should devote themselves to some such mild form of suttee. Other men's widows, he thought, might do what they pleased:—but for Robert Lorimer's widow to be thinking of a second marriage within little more than two years of her husband's death!—no, most decidedly Frank did not like it. He was conscious of a sudden jealous tenderness for his brother's memory. How Robert had worshipped Elizabeth, and yet she hardly ever even referred to him!

It often happens that when two people are to-

gether who know each other intimately, without any ostensible cause or spoken word, they will both fall into the same train of thought at the same moment. You may put this singular phenomenon down to mere coincidence,—which, like charity, has a capacity for covering a multitude of inconvenient facts, —or you may talk learnedly of brain waves, and subtle magnetic correspondences between kindred minds. The phenomenon remains, whatever may be the explanation of it. Mr. Leeper's somewhat ferocious proposal of the day before had pressed the possibility of a second marriage clearly upon Elizabeth's mind. She had heard some slight rumours of the gossip regarding herself and Wharton, which had been going the rounds among her friends and acquaintances: but Elizabeth, confident in the honesty of her own friendship, had put it aside as a disagreeable impertinence, upon which she would not condescend to bestow a second thought.

Now, as she played with her black-and-gold fan, while Frank Lorimer stood meditating on the hearth-rug, she had a sudden illumination. People thought that under cover of friendship she was trying to make Wharton marry her. Wharton himself thought so, and had therefore discreetly retired. Everybody—possibly even Fanny and Frank—thought that, to use a vulgar expression, she had been throwing herself at this young gentleman's head!

Elizabeth sat aghast as this odious notion unfolded itself before her. Ashamed, angry, and outraged, she looked up suddenly at Frank, dreading to read a confirmation of her fears in his expression.

Frank Lorimer was feeling somewhat angry too. He liked his friend immensely: but just at this moment he was chiefly sensible of a keen feeling of loving jealousy for his brother.

When Elizabeth glanced up, their eyes met. Both she and her companion were conscious of a curious sensation. All the vague amiability had died out of Frank Lorimer's face,—in as far as it was possible for him to look severe, he looked so at this moment. This change of expression developed the latent likeness between him and Robert Lorimer very clearly. For an instant it seemed to Elizabeth that her dead husband was looking down earnestly, almost reproachfully, at her. She drew back with a start, and put up one hand almost as though she wanted to force him away from her.

The action was so rapid that Frank Lorimer hardly observed it. He turned away, and after a moment said quietly:

"Have you got that sketch, Elizabeth,—I've often meant to ask you and haven't quite liked to, somehow,—that Adolphus Carr once did of Robert? Have you got it, or have I?"

Elizabeth straightened herself up and clasped her hands tightly together in her lap. Her forehead contracted sharply, as with a sensation of sudden pain. There was a moment's pause, and then she answered in a voice which she evidently had a difficulty in keeping steady:

"I have got it. But—but why do you ask just now?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Frank, feeling a little

confused. "It occurred to me just now. I shouldn't like it to be lost, you know, and I couldn't find it. Fanny said you had it."

"Yes, I have got it," Elizabeth repeated. "Fanny was quite right."

Frank Lorimer's indignation was not of the burning order. Already he began to accuse himself of having treated his fair sister-in-law with a singular absence of the delicate consideration which was her due.

"Fanny generally is right, you know," he said, with a slight smile, wishing to pass the matter off as lightly as possible. Mentally he called himself an awkward brute.

Elizabeth had risen from her seat. She stood for a moment looking straight in front of her. Then she threw back her head with a certain defiant movement, and turning to her companion, said coldly:

"If we are going to talk business, hadn't we better begin at once? I am not quick at figures; it will take me a long time to understand, I daresay. Shall we come into the other room and begin?"

Frank Lorimer felt rather humble as he followed Elizabeth into the back drawing-room. He told himself that he had given way to a nasty suspicious state of mind, and that he ought to be ashamed of himself.—No doubt the sketch was hanging up in Elizabeth's bedroom with fresh flowers before it. Nice women are given to arranging dainty little altars and shrines, at which to worship their dead saints. Frank felt very apologetic. He had trodden on sacred ground without making any decent attempt

to remove his shoes first. He felt that he had given Elizabeth cause to be angry with him. He was less inclined than ever to say unpleasant things to her about her extravagant expenditure.

"I blame myself very much in these business matters of yours, Elizabeth," he said. "I'm afraid I have been wretchedly negligent. I ought to have looked after things more, and then you wouldn't have all this worry."

Elizabeth sat down at the writing-table, and began arranging the papers. She was vividly conscious all the while that the drawing of her dead husband lay, face downwards, in the drawer, just under her hand. She had squandered Robert's money to help her to forget Robert. The thought was hardly a soothing one just now.

"I don't think I need bother you with a statement of everything," Frank went on. "If you'll just agree to my suggestion, and leave the rest to me, I'll set it all straight."

Elizabeth looked up quickly, with a keenly-distressed expression.

"Oh no, no!" she said. "I can't let you do that."

"I don't mean settle it in the positive and material form," answered Frank, smiling. "It can all be arranged without any more trouble to me than the writing of a few letters."

"It is a miserable business," cried Elizabeth, getting up suddenly and turning away, while the hot tears came into her eyes.

"Pray don't make yourself so unhappy, Elizabeth,"

said Frank quickly. "Nothing so very desperate has happened, after all. You're in a little mess, but you're by no means bankrupt yet."

Elizabeth was always disposed to feel too strongly, Frank knew. He was prepared for that: but still the expression of her face did seem to him most unnecessarily tragic at this moment.

"What shall I do?" asked she, without looking at him.

"Well," he answered, "if you didn't mind going away for a time, and letting the house for the season, —it's so pretty that you might ask a fancy price for it—I think we could put all your affairs straight."

"I am quite willing to go," said Elizabeth. The house and all connected with it represented so much annoyance and disappointment just now, that she was disposed to welcome almost any change.

"I suppose you could go down to Mr. Mainwaring's, at Claybrooke, for the summer, couldn't you?" Frank added.

"Oh no, please! not there," said Elizabeth quickly.

She shrank from the idea of Claybrooke under these circumstances. Elizabeth had begun to feel that she had not behaved altogether nicely to the Mainwarings. She recoiled from the notion of making use of those persons whom she had formerly neglected.

"Mightn't I go abroad?" she said. "I suppose I should have to take Martha with me, but I could live very cheaply. I could easily find a quiet inexpensive *pension* at Vevey, or somewhere about there."

"Wouldn't you be awfully bored, though?" observed Frank.

"Oh no," she answered. "I think I should rather enjoy being alone."

At this moment, with the thought of Fred Wharton's possible interpretation of her conduct strong in her mind, and the memory of her husband so strangely and suddenly forced upon her remembrance, Elizabeth had a sort of sullen longing to escape from everybody.

"There are always the mountains and the lake to fall back upon," she added.

Frank made a rather expressive face.

"I don't go in very much for mountains myself, you know," he said. "They are rather grisly companions when one is alone. But you do just as you like, Elizabeth."

"I don't feel as if it mattered very much where I went, or what I did," said Elizabeth, with a sudden bitterness. "I am afraid I am altogether a superfluity. Everything seems to go wrong with me."

Frank, not having the keys to the position, could only smooth his fair beard and wish, in silence, that women were not so much given to making general statements of a lugubrious and unreasonable nature.

After a minute he observed, in tones intended to be encouraging:—

"Fanny's bent on going abroad again this year, so I suppose we shall go. Fanny generally has her own way in the end. She and the children might join you in July, and I would follow as soon as I can escape from that everlasting paper."

Elizabeth did not offer any comment.

"Very well, then," he said, "you'll leave all these accounts and things in my hands. I'll see about letting the house at once. We ought to let it from the beginning of May. Can you pack up and clear out by then, do you think?"

"Oh yes!" she replied wearily. "I can be ready any time. The sooner the better, as far as I am concerned."

CHAPTER VII.

"For a pinte of hony thou shalt here likely find a gallon of gaul, for a dram of pleasure a pound of pain, for an inch of mirth an ell of mone; as Ivie doth an Oke, these miseries encompass our life."

IT is not necessary to follow Elizabeth through the fatiguing processes of packing up, arranging her house, and taking leave of her acquaintances,—many of whom were a good deal interested by the news of her approaching departure. Wharton not to be found, and Mrs. Lorimer letting her house and going abroad!—it looked very much as if something had happened. A good many questions were put to Fanny Lorimer: but the anxious inquirers were not very fully satisfied by her answers. Fanny Lorimer had private reasons for desiring to keep her own counsel; and displayed a considerable amount of the ingenuity that her husband so much admired, in baffling her too curious interlocutors. Suffice it to say, that the house was let at a high rent to a clean and childless tenant; and that Elizabeth saw that her pecuniary difficulties were in a fair way to be eventually settled.

There is something depressing in the ending of almost any episode in one's career. The episode, in itself, may not have been very brilliant or satisfac-

tory; yet there is a sense of regret as one turns the page, and says to oneself:—"This is done with, any way. It may influence the future a little, possibly: but, practically, it is past and over, and will never be read through again." So felt Elizabeth the last few days she spent in London.

Things seemed to have broken off short, and the future looked very blank and empty to her. In three days she would start on her journey; and she began to fear, with Frank, that the mountains might prove rather cold and unresponsive company after all. She had been packing and arranging and saying good-bye all day long; about half-past five a necessity for air and quiet came over her, and wrapping herself in a long fur-trimmed over-jacket—for the April evenings were still cold—she went out to refresh herself with a solitary walk by the river. She had been hurried and bothered in the last few weeks. She had been called on suddenly to form new plans, and take an entirely new departure. She wanted a little time to arrange her ideas and get some general view of the situation.

There had been a good deal of rain earlier in the day, and the sky was covered with a layer of dull gray cloud. The rain was over, but the pavements were still wet, and the unlovely image of the lamp-posts was repeated in ugly zigzag lines on their shiny surface. The river was very full, and swirled by with little hurrying circles and eddies, here and there, breaking the face of its otherwise smooth and oily current. It choked and gurgled around the piers of the bridges, and then swept on again swiftly, reflect-

ing the sad, leaden-coloured sky above in its broad unrestful bosom. The buildings on either bank loomed, black and mysterious, through the dense misty atmosphere. The Embankment itself was quiet and deserted enough: but Elizabeth could hear distinctly, in the distance, the hoarse murmur rising up from the crowded streets. Suddenly a train rushed out across the railway-bridge, with a clang of metal and roar of steam; and when the noise of it had died away far down in the south, she noted the sharp rattle of a hansom over a stone crossing, the steady thud of the horse's hoofs and the crunching of the roadway under the wheels as it passed her,—another rattle over the stones again in the distance, and the sound of it, too, died away in the unceasing murmur of the great, dim, toiling city.

A sense of almost intolerable loneliness came over Elizabeth. There was something weird and strange to-day in the hurrying river and in all these familiar sounds. She seemed to be standing on the edge of a vast world of movement, of life, of earnest striving and endeavour, in which she had neither lot nor part. The past had not satisfied her hungry craving for happiness, and the future seemed to offer even less than the past. Love and marriage? —alas! she had tried them, they were over, and had yielded but scant delight. Friendship?—her friend had grown tired, and left her without a word! Duty?—Elizabeth shrank from the idea of duty, it meant humiliation and self-abasement. Mrs. Mainwaring's face, thin and faded, came before her, and Mr. Leeper's hot denunciations sounded in her ears.

While the wet south wind swept across the river, bringing the delicate flush of youth and health to her cheeks, and men and women, passing by, turned to look once again at the richly-dressed, stately young lady pacing slowly along in the damp and dusky evening, Elizabeth felt herself utterly weary and desolate. Was it true, then, that life had little enough to give, after all? Did it really offer nothing but illusion, disappointment, hopes unfulfilled, solemn vows broken, fair promises forgotten? And then the end of it, cold, dark, and ugly; sweet lips that would kiss, kind hands that would clasp no more for ever; beautiful limbs lying rigid in death; eyes closed, and gentle voices hushed in everlasting silence; and beyond—a hope merely, a possibility,—to faith a promise, a pledge, but faith, alas! is often too weak to grasp it. Elizabeth thought of the quiet room, shaded from the fierce glare of the southern sun, in which Robert Lorimer had panted his life slowly and painfully away two short years before; of the last smile with which he had turned to Frank and her as they watched together by his bedside; of the horrible chill and bewilderment that had overtaken her, when she realised that he would never move or speak to her again. Was it possible that this was all that life could give her, after all?

Elizabeth was filled with an immense self-pity. Those pagan instincts which are strong in every nature that is capable of being deeply moved by outward nature, by beauty, by the glory of physical health and physical joy, stirred within her. She revolted passionately against things as they are;

against cold and relentless fact; against the sorrowful ordering of this world; against the strange unimportance of individual suffering in the general movement of things. It all seemed cruel, cruel, cruel. Why was she unsatisfied? why was she tormented thus? She rebelled against her fate; and, like Job of old, was tempted to "curse God and die."

Down in the west, above the jagged line of house-roofs and chimneys on the river-bank, the clouds were slowly breaking; and, between the long level lines of them there showed a space of open sky,—pale clear green, glowing into delicate saffron light down towards the horizon. It seemed infinitely far, ineffably pure, utterly peaceful;—set there for a token of final and everlasting rest to the troubled and struggling children of men. To Elizabeth it seemed to image forth the pale passionless rapture of saints and angels. It was of the heaven heavenly, she was of the earth earthy. She trembled and shrank away from the lofty purity of the Christian ideal, and demanded some more immediate and material description of satisfaction and happiness. She was, she felt, too much rooted and grounded in what was simply human to be able to fling herself for comfort on what was divine. It seemed to her that the awful and majestic figures of saints and martyrs, crowned now with the undying glories of their past sacrifice, and joyful in untiring adoration, could never have been men and women of like passions with herself. They seemed useless to her for comfort, or encouragement, or example. Their past anguish and their present bliss seemed as far removed from her ordi-

nary, vain, and trivial life, as the unutterable purity of the western sky was removed from the muddy swirling river, with its floating bits of wreck and weed. Deep down in the river-current, too, she feared, worse things than mere broken wreck and weed moved sullenly along,—foul dead things which had once shown fair and graceful enough in the genial sunshine: but now, for very shame, hid their dreadful and misshapen forms in the cold heart of the hurrying stream. So different, it seemed to her, were the human and the divine. The first had failed her, and she was desolate: but she had neither the faith nor the courage yet to repent, and throw herself unreservedly for comfort and support upon the second.

It was growing dusk. The long lines of lamps flickered along the roadway, while the still wet pavement gave back their blurred and distorted reflection. More than one passer-by had paused a moment, to look rather curiously at the tall young lady loitering in the chilly evening air. Elizabeth had been too busy with her own thoughts to heed them: but she was sensible, at last, that some man passed her and then stopped and turned back. Moved by a sudden impulse, she turned round too and faced him. It was Fred Wharton.

"Ah!" she cried, stretching out her hands towards him. "I am so glad, so very glad, you have come back."

Wharton, during his retirement in Sussex, had pictured to himself, pretty often, how he would meet Elizabeth again, and what he would say to her: but

this meeting was both unexpected in itself and unusual in its surroundings. Between the weird spiritual light of the western sky and the uncertain glimmering of the vulgar gas-lamps, it seemed to him that her face looked strangely white and scared, her sweet mouth tremulous, her beautiful eyes wild. She looked to him like some lovely lost child. He could not stop to indulge in the usual little courtesies of recognition ; he longed supremely to protect and comfort her.

"Something is the matter. Somebody has frightened you," he said fiercely, possessed with a strong desire to find that obnoxious somebody and destroy the creature on the spot.

"No," said Elizabeth, "nothing is the matter, and that, in a way, is the worst of it. I have only frightened myself with my own fancies. Ah!" she added, putting out her hands with a weary despairing gesture, "it is all too big for me."

A good-looking young man and an unusually handsome well-dressed woman, standing and talking earnestly together in the twilight, are pretty sure to attract attention and suggest interesting but somewhat peculiar comments. Just as Elizabeth spoke two men passed, and Wharton heard one of them laugh, as he moved away, and make some observation to his companion. Immediately Mrs. Frank Lorimer and all the outraged social proprieties rushed into his mind.

"Hadn't we better walk on, Mrs. Lorimer?" he said hastily. "I'm afraid it may look a little odd for us to be standing here, so."

The observation jarred unpleasantly upon Elizabeth. It seemed so cold and unsympathetic. When Wharton suddenly appeared before her in the midst of her loneliness and distress, she had turned to him with a sense of comfort and security. She had come nearer changing friendship into a tenderer feeling than at any previous moment of their acquaintance. Now his words almost seemed to imply that she had gone too far. She remembered her fears regarding the cause of his disappearance; she recalled the gossip which, she knew, had gone about concerning their connection. Elizabeth's pride came to her rescue. She entirely recovered her self-possession, and turning, walked rapidly towards home.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Wharton," she said after a minute or two, with a certain coldness and dignity of manner;—"because I am going abroad the day after to-morrow. I shall probably be away all the summer. We have seen a good deal of each other, you know, at different times; and I am glad to have this opportunity of saying good-bye to you."

Wharton observed the change of tone. Mentally he cursed Mrs. Frank Lorimer. He was, also, immensely surprised at the information Elizabeth gave him. It would simplify matters for her to go away, and yet somehow Wharton was conscious that he felt very sorry.

"But why are you going?" he asked. "This is so unexpected to me. Must you really go?"

"Oh yes, I must go," answered Elizabeth. "I

have let my house for the season. I must go, and, indeed, I believe I should be very sorry not to go."

Wharton could not understand it. They walked on in silence for a minute or two, then he said rather inconsequently:—

"I brought you some white flowers the last time I was at your house,—that afternoon when you came in late. I have wondered, once or twice since, whether you ever had them."

"Fanny Lorimer was holding them," answered Elizabeth, "when I came in. She seemed to wish for them. They were not really mine to give, but I let her keep them."

She walked on quickly. She was anxious to get home as soon as possible, and not to prolong their *tête-à-tête* for a moment more than was actually necessary. Just as they arrived at the house Elizabeth turned to her companion; her expression was somewhat hard, all the gentleness had gone out of her face.

"You remember our compact?" she said. "You have taught me something about friendship in the last eighteen months, and I thank you. It has been interesting. It is a very pretty game, only, unfortunately, it seems people so soon get tired of playing it."

Then she held out her hand to him. "Good-bye, Mr. Wharton," she said.

Wharton ought to have been glad; things were certainly turning up; it would be very easy for him to accept the ruling of events, and avoid further complications: yet, so perverse is the heart of man,

he felt anything but satisfied. In point of fact, he felt rather desperate.

"But shan't I see you again? I must see you again," he said.

"I shall be engaged all to-morrow," answered Elizabeth coldly.

"Not in the evening," said Wharton. "Surely I may come in in the evening."

Elizabeth rang the door-bell. She was silent for a moment: but, just as Martha opened the door from within, she turned to Wharton and answered him quickly.

"Yes," she said, "you can come in in the evening, if you want to."

Then she passed into the house. On the hall-table lay a gentleman's visiting-card. Elizabeth picked it up languidly, and moved under the lamp to read it.

It bore a name she remembered very well—the name of Mr. Edward Dadley.

CHAPTER VIII.

"For auld lang syne."

As a traveller, lingering in the dusty glaring streets of some far-off southern city and hearing suddenly a few bars of an old well-remembered tune, is carried back in fancy, across land and sea, to the cool English air and soft green English landscape, to home, and the simple vivid joys and sorrows of childhood, to those clear early days that seem to have no shadows and no perspective; and, being thus carried back in fancy, feels a sense of repose and quiet and security stealing over his whole being, —so Elizabeth, seeing Edward Dadley's name thus unexpectedly in the midst of her loneliness, and confusion, and disappointment, was filled with a certain vague hope of rest and contentment.

It has been said, that first love is infinite and has no second like to it. The latter part of the proposition, I fancy, most people will be willing enough to assent to, whatever they may hold concerning the first part of it. Assertions regarding infinity are easier to make than to sustain, as a rule. But first love has no second like to it, for it is an initiation into the mysteries, and must ever after

exercise a strange and subtle influence over the mind. It is of the nature of a revelation; for the first time we worship in the temple face to face with our divinity. Many of us worship pretty freely in that temple afterwards. We get to know nearly every nook and corner of the building. We grow more or less accustomed to the passionate strains of music and to the rich odour of the incense; we cease to be much impressed by the "dim religious light." Some of us even go further, and discover that the golden image of the goddess has feet of common clay; that the singers and musicians have a tendency to gossip over the last bit of scandal, and even to eat oranges, during the intervals of the services; and that the incense itself may be bought extremely cheap in the market-place just outside. Yet, notwithstanding the trying disillusionments which come to us with time and knowledge, very few of us can regard with entire indifference the man or woman who first drew aside for us the curtain that shrouds the temple door; who showed us for the first time the eternal loveliness of the goddess; and taught us first how to move within that mysterious inner circle of perception and emotion which is commonly called love.

Elizabeth Lorimer's first lover—the man who had, for good or evil, first drawn aside the curtain for her—was a fresh-faced young Englishman of a common enough type. Clean-limbed, tender-hearted, willing to adore, and quite incapable of understanding the depth or the breadth of her character. He was not a very remarkable or admirable young man.

He hunted, and fished, and made love, and talked rudimentary politics over a good bottle of claret after dinner, in a very commonplace way. He was not in the least troubled with ideas. Nay, further, when called upon by his father to do so, he had, after something of a struggle, followed the very sensible, if unromantic, example of Gibbon, the historian, and while he "sighed as a lover" had "obeyed as a son." Elizabeth's pride had revolted at his desertion of her; had revolted so strongly that it hurried her, as we have seen, into a marriage with Robert Lorimer. In a way, she might put down all the troubles of her young life to Edward Dadley's account; and yet—yet the memory of first love is very strong.

Coming in from her dreary walk on the Embankment, parting half in anger from her friend on the doorstep, Elizabeth suffered a strange transition of feeling when she found Edward Dadley's card on the hall-table. She had not seen him for four years. She did not know anything about his present circumstances. She did not even know whether he was married or single: but she was filled with a longing to meet him once again; to go back, for a few hours at least, to that pleasant easy time before she had known anything practically of sorrow or disappointment. She longed to breathe the morning air again, after struggling in the heat and confusion of the noonday. Everything seemed to be slipping away from her just now. A foolish hope, a half-despairing fancy, that somehow a meeting with her old lover might make things clear and

straight, came over her. Elizabeth knew dimly all the while that she was ignoring the lessons of experience; that she was fighting against fate; that she was refusing to acknowledge an inevitable conclusion. It may seem a little stupid of any person to do this; and yet, to my mind, there is something wonderfully moving in the gallant hopeless determination with which the young fight against the hard teachings of fact and experience. They may be fools. They are fools, no doubt: but they are fools whom one suffers gladly, for love of their magnificent obstinacy and finely-tempered courage.

Elizabeth went slowly upstairs with the visiting-card still in her hand. She felt a little reckless—the world seemed, in a way, to be coming to an end the day after to-morrow. Meanwhile she would defy fate; she would do what she liked; she would give herself one last chance. She would see Edward Dadley somehow. And if nothing came of it?—and in justice to poor Elizabeth, it must be owned that she had formed no clear idea as to what could possibly come of it—well then, she thought, bitterly enough, she would have to own herself beaten and let the world come to an end as soon as it pleased.

"At last!" said Mrs. Frank Lorimer in her clear emphatic voice as Elizabeth entered the drawing-room. "My dear Elizabeth, where in the name of patience have you been? I have been waiting here the most interminable length of time to see you."

Fanny Lorimer had a great power of letting

plain uncompromising daylight into the minds of other people: but Elizabeth was too highly wrought —too entirely occupied with her own sensations,— to be awakened even by her sister-in-law's rapid and decided opening of the shutters, just at present.

"I have been walking, down by the river," she answered abstractedly.

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Frank, "doesn't it strike you that it is just a little late for you to be out walking alone?"

"I wasn't alone," observed Elizabeth simply.

"Oh?" said Mrs. Frank, with a note of interrogation in her voice.

She looked rather hard at Elizabeth; she had an impression that there was something odd about her. She wondered if anything could have happened.

"I met Mr. Wharton," said Elizabeth, with the same air of indifference and abstraction; "and he walked back here with me."

A sudden cheerful alertness seemed to take possession of Fanny Lorimer's small person. Fred Wharton had come back, then, and just in time. She hardly knew how to be sufficiently thankful. She had not made a fatal mistake, after all. Elizabeth seemed strangely preoccupied: but that Mrs. Frank was charmed at—it certainly meant, she argued, that something had happened, or was just about to happen. Everything was really going right, then. She had hardly realised before how dreadfully anxious Fred Wharton's absence had made her. Her present sense of relief was intensely exhilarating. She smiled

a little to herself, and folded her small neat hands restfully on her lap as she said quietly :—

"You have an admirable indifference to public opinion, really, Elizabeth. You know the circumstances and surroundings of your walk might strike some people as slightly peculiar."

If Fanny Lorimer had failed to awaken Elizabeth at first, she certainly succeeded in doing so very completely now. Elizabeth turned towards her with a sense of considerable annoyance.

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"Only that you are young and very good-looking," answered the other; "and that of course you run the risk of being talked about. You know everybody does that, unless they are immensely careful."

Elizabeth had not expected this sort of open attack. It seemed to her that Fanny Lorimer was playing exactly the same part that Mrs. Mainwaring had played two years before. It is interesting to observe how history repeats itself: but there are some experiences none of us desire particularly to go through twice, even for the sake of proving the truth of that valuable saying.

The drawing-room was warm after the cold damp air of the evening outside. Elizabeth felt both mentally and physically stifled. She had a sense of heat, and crowding, and confusion. No doubt her state of mind was exaggerated: but hers was a nature prone to exaggeration. Fanny Lorimer's words intensified all her distressing feelings. She felt as though she was caught in a great spider's web; the delicate, almost invisible threads clung

about her, impeding her movement, almost choking her; wrapping her relentlessly and hopelessly round with their thin compelling strength. She struggled against this paralysing sensation; she determined angrily, come what might, to see Edward Dadley again.

"This room is intolerably hot," she said, for all answer to her sister-in-law's strictures upon her conduct.

"The fire is large," replied Fanny Lorimer calmly. "I suppose your maids are anxious to finish up your whole stock of coals before they go. Maids always regard incoming tenants as their natural enemies. They can't bear leaving a scrap of anything for their successors. I fancy we are all inclined to be a little prejudiced against our successors."

"The heat is intolerable," said Elizabeth again.

She moved across the room hastily and threw one of the windows wide open, letting in a rush of rain-laden westerly wind, which made the heavy curtains flap and the candles flicker.

"Oh! what a fearful draught!" cried Mrs. Frank, putting up both hands to keep a little of the unexpected blast from her face. "For pity's sake, Elizabeth, shut down that window, and come and speak to me like a reasonable creature. If you want to give me something, pray let it be something more agreeable than a violent cold in my head."

Elizabeth shut the window down slowly. The cold air and the physical exertion had done her good. She felt less excited and bewildered, yet more determined than ever to have her own way, in one

matter, at least. She sat down quietly, and looked at Edward Dadley's card again. She observed that he had scribbled the name of the hotel at which he was staying in the corner of it.

"Now that the whirlwind has ceased," said Mrs. Frank, unbuttoning her long gloves with great composure, "I may as well tell you what I came here on purpose to say. Frank wants you to come over to dinner to-night. To-morrow he'll be busy all day. You really must come back with me this evening, Elizabeth. We'll have a lovely time putting the babies to bed before dinner. Now you'll please Frank and come, won't you?"

There was something soothing in the thought of those two small, prattling, curly-headed creatures in their little white night-gowns. They seemed to belong to the same simple unperplexed side of life as Edward Dadley. There was a sweet, though sad, expression on Elizabeth's face as she answered Fanny Lorimer.

"Yes," she said, "I'll come gladly,—especially to see the babies."

Mrs. Frank looked at her intently for a moment.

"You certainly are a very attractive woman, Elizabeth," she remarked. "There is a great deal of *cachet* about you. I enjoy immensely having you to think about, though I don't pretend to understand you. I hope you won't do anything very extraordinary while you are abroad. I should be so sorry not to be present if you do anything extraordinary. Pray keep it till the summer, till I come out to you."

Elizabeth always disliked these intimate reflections of her sister-in-law's.

"I suppose I shall see you to-morrow evening again," she said, ignoring Mrs. Frank's last remarks.

"Ah! my dear Elizabeth," rejoined the other, "that is really dreadful. Now I must confess all my sins. I ought to have done it before; but something put it out of my head. I really have been a fearful idiot,—I quite forgot it was your last day. Will you ever forgive me?" she added with a very bright smile and charming little air of penitence. "It was horribly stupid of me: but I made an engagement for to-morrow evening."

"Then you won't be able to come here?" inquired Elizabeth.

Fanny Lorimer's observations regarding her walk with Fred Wharton had made her acutely uncomfortable again. One of the very last things she desired was to spend an evening alone with him,—still less did she want him to be third wheel to the cart if Edward Dadley came, as she intended that he should.

"Oh, we'll come in for half-an-hour," said Fanny Lorimer.

It struck her some arrangement might be pending with Wharton. She did not at all want him to be put off.

"Don't alter any plans for us. We'll certainly come in. We haven't to go to our affair till late; and of course we should have come to say good-bye, any way. Now, Elizabeth, do come back with me at once," she added, getting up. "I'm sure you needn't

change your gown. It is grand enough to receive the whole of the peerage in,—and Frank and I are very simple people, you know."

Elizabeth paused a moment before answering. She looked tired and pale, and yet her eyes were unusually bright.

"My dear creature, it will be long past the children's bed-time if you're not quick, said Fanny Lorimer a little impatiently.

"Oh, just give me two minutes," cried Elizabeth. "I must write a note; I won't be long."

Mrs. Frank felt that things were serious. She was playing her game altogether in the dark. She felt that it was necessary to be cautious.

"I'll wait," she said. "But pray don't put anybody off on account of our engagement. We can quite well come in for a time to-morrow evening."

Elizabeth moved quickly into the other room and sat down at the writing-table. Fanny Lorimer waited, slowly buttoning up her gloves again. She was a good deal interested in the thought of Elizabeth's note. She felt very curious to know whether it would be addressed to Fred Wharton or not. She heard Elizabeth writing hurriedly for a minute or two. Then there was a pause, followed by the sound of paper being sharply torn up, and the fluttering noise of it as it fell into the paper basket. Mrs. Frank remembered those little sounds afterwards. She never quite understood why they had a special significance for her: but she never could hear them in a quiet room without thinking of Elizabeth's pale tired face and bright eyes, and of the damp gusty

evening when she waited so long for her to come in from her walk by the river.

There was a sound of writing again. Then Elizabeth got up from her seat at the table.

"I'll be ready in five minutes, Fanny," she said as she went out of the room.

The adage says that there are more ways of killing a cat than by choking her with cream. There are more ways, certainly, of learning the destination of a letter than by asking the writer of it point-blank for whom it is intended.

Mrs. Frank Lorimer remembered that there was some delightfully quaint china on the mantel-shelf in the back drawing-room. She had often, she thought, wished to examine it. She strolled into the other room.—The china of course was the object in view, but she was obliged to pass close to the writing-table. On the open blotting-book lay Elizabeth's note. The candles were burning brightly, and Elizabeth's handwriting was large and distinct. Mrs. Frank could not help seeing the address. It surprised her very much. She had never heard of Edward Dadley before in her life. She had made almost sure that Elizabeth was writing to Fred Wharton. This little discovery put out all her calculations; yet perhaps it intensified the interest of the situation. Fanny Lorimer decided that she and Frank would certainly spend half an hour with Elizabeth next evening.

CHAPTER IX.

"And sometimes, by still harder fate,
The lovers meet, but meet too late."

WHARTON passed anything but a comfortable day. He had a long sitting in the morning from the aforementioned Mrs. Ostler Westcott, a very pretty young woman who was just making a reputation in certain circles of society for her beauty. Generally Wharton enjoyed his work heartily, but to-day somehow he did not feel at all in the humour for it. He seemed quite unable to make satisfactory progress; he was both irritable and preoccupied, and gave his fair sitter some excuse for announcing later to her little court of friends, rivals, and admirers, that "Mr. Wharton was really rather a dull young man, and that she, for her part, considered both him and his drawings immensely overrated." In the afternoon Wharton, feeling that he must occupy himself somehow, decided to go out and make some calls: but, on second thoughts, he arrived at the melancholy conclusion that there were not any members of his acquaintance whom it would give him the smallest pleasure to see at this moment. Formerly he had very thoroughly enjoyed his own society: but times

had changed sadly with him lately. He was beginning to find himself a very poor companion; now and then he went so far, indeed, as to vote himself an intolerable bore.

When the time arrived for him to present himself at Mrs. Lorimer's, he felt as wretchedly uncertain and undecided as ever. The sudden outburst of strong feeling which had carried him away for a time, when he first met Elizabeth the night before, had died down again. He really could not tell the least now, whether he was in love with her or not. He fancied a certain feeling was there: but it wanted some striking circumstances to develop it and make it active. And how unlikely, thought Wharton dismally, were any striking circumstances to surround his meeting with Elizabeth this evening! The Frank Lorimers would be there. Everything would be just as usual. He would, most likely, play a little; Elizabeth would probably be tired, and would not talk much. Then they would all say good-bye, and everything would go on just the same as ever. It was very annoying. Wharton had often laughed at his own peculiarities: but he had always done so in a very sympathetic spirit. He really cherished and respected all his oddities and little affectations. He thought himself pleasantly original. To-day he laughed at himself rather bitterly. There was a spice of contempt in his amusement. He was not sure that he was not a very poor creature, after all. Such a state of mind is far from exhilarating. Wharton knew that his evening-coat was faultless in fit, that his shirt was a miracle of ironing, that his collar

was eminently the right thing, that he was in every way an unusually good-looking fellow; yet, for all that, he was a thoroughly depressed and unhappy young gentleman as he walked into Elizabeth Lorimer's pretty drawing-room on this memorable evening.

Once inside the door, he stopped, utterly surprised and forgetful of his own little troubles, to contemplate his hostess,—over whom a remarkable change seemed to have come.

Elizabeth was standing in the middle of the room, with her head thrown back and a curiously intense expression on her face, as if she was listening for some expected sound. In her hands she held a long rosary of large brown wooden beads, with a roughly carved crucifix hanging from it. She stood twisting the beads about in her fingers with a strange restless movement.

Elizabeth had come across the rosary that day —as she was looking over some drawers, in a cabinet in her bedroom. It had been put away there a long time before, and she had almost forgotten the fact of its existence: but, seeing it again, she remembered very clearly the circumstances under which it had come into her possession. Robert Lorimer had given it to her. She remembered, as if it were but yesterday, the sparkling beryl-green lake, the purple mountains sleeping in the still summer sunshine; the gray walls of the monastery in the foreground, with trailing creepers, and delicate ferns, and great masses of crimson valerian, masking the rugged sternness of their

masonry; the laughing Savoyard boatman, in his blue shirt, with a bunch of red roses stuck in his rather dilapidated hat, lying lazily on his back in the long rank grass; the quaint little booth just outside the monastery gate, where a gentle, patient-looking lay-brother, in sandals and a rough brown habit, set out his small wares—*bénitiers*, rosaries, strings of beads, little tin virgins, emblems of local and patron saints—to tempt the handsome young English couple who had just rowed across the glittering lake from the gay French watering-place on the other side; while far away down in the south the rugged crest of the Mont Cenis, awful in its loneliness and the immaculate purity of its whiteness, rose up into the deep blue sky, blocking the way to the passion and the romance of lovely Italy. Elizabeth remembered the scene and the day clearly. It was one of those days that stand out from the experience of a lifetime—a day on which, it seemed to her, she had come very near grasping the phantom of happiness which it had been her fate—or her sin, poor child—so constantly and vainly to pursue.

Now, in the hour of her need, she found this rough wooden rosary again, and with it she found a store of gracious and tender memories. A half-superstitious fancy that it might help her in trouble, save her in temptation, shield her from evil, came over her; and, with an unreasoning faith in its protecting virtues, she brought it downstairs with her, and held it in her hands when her guest came into the room.

But the rosary only attracted Wharton's atten-

tion, when he first looked at her, from the strange contrast it formed, with its old-world suggestions of sorrow and pain and penitence, to the rest of Elizabeth's appearance. She was dressed in a gown of soft ivory-white cashmere, plentifully trimmed with rich old lace. The sleeves of the dress were short, with falling ruffles of lace, leaving her arms bare from the elbow. The neck of it was open, with a soft ruffle of lace around it too. On her arms were gold bracelets, and round her throat a gold chain with a square gold cross; on her bosom was a bunch of deep-red hothouse flowers, roses and crimson amaryllis.

There was nothing very extraordinary about Elizabeth's dress, after all. Indeed it was in a much simpler style than that which she usually affected. It was the change from black to white which struck Wharton so forcibly. He thought she looked younger and gentler, more of a girl and less of a woman; while the strangely pathetic quality of her beauty seemed in a way intensified and deepened. Wharton felt as if she could not be the same woman that he had parted with, on the damp doorstep, the night before. She seemed changed altogether. He did not know whether he quite liked the change or not. There was a restless brilliance in her eyes and a clear burning red in her cheeks. As Wharton looked at her in her white dress, with the rosary in her hands, he had a strange sense that there was some terrible sacrifice about to be accomplished, and that this fair woman was the victim.

Elizabeth laid the rosary down quickly on the

table, and then received him with a pretty show of cordiality. But it seemed to Wharton that there was a hint of coming disaster in her very brightness, which pained and perplexed him.

"I feel a little to-night," said Elizabeth, smiling as she held out her hand to him, "as if I was bidding my farewell to the stage. I am taking leave of my audience; I am going to retire into private life. I want to leave a good impression on the public mind,—for the public, on the whole, has been very kind to me. You see I have arrayed myself in dainty new garments, and filled my rooms with sweet spring flowers. You shall sing your good-bye song to-night, and then the curtain will come down, and the lights will be put out; and,—I may be foolish,—but I have a presentiment, Mr. Wharton, that it will be altogether *adieu*, and not *au revoir*, to this poor player."

Elizabeth said the last few words softly, and with a touch of earnestness which was a little disagreeable to Wharton. He thought she seemed feverish and over-excited; for once he became extremely practical and full of common sense.

"You've been doing too much, and you're tired, Mrs. Lorimer," he answered. "I've had dozens and dozens of presentiments which subsequent events proved to be entirely false, for one that has really come true."

Elizabeth looked down for a minute; then she smiled at him rather defiantly.

"Very well, then," she said, "if you object to presentiments so much we'll forget all about them.

We'll pretend to be very cheerful and encouraging, and talk about the beauties of Switzerland, and the charms of foreign travel, and the relief of avoiding a season in London. I wish to be most accommodating, as I shall not probably see you again for a long while.—But I must honestly tell you that I don't think the country has quite agreed with you somehow. I fancy the March winds have blown away a good deal of your usual urbanity."

Decidedly Elizabeth Lorimer was not like herself to-night. Wharton looked at her curiously.

"Things have not gone quite so well with me lately as they usually do, Mrs. Lorimer," he said. "I have had a number of new experiences—interesting, no doubt, from one point of view, but not wholly agreeable all the same."

"That's a pity," answered Elizabeth quickly; she seemed to have a sort of necessity for talking. "I don't think your new experiences have quite suited you. You have been working a little too hard at them possibly. Your *cachet*, as Fanny would say, is certainly to be serene."

"And I have been anything but serene," Wharton rejoined. "I have been dreadfully worried and bothered. I have been utterly unphilosophic and——"

But there he stopped. Martha was announcing somebody. Elizabeth made a rapid movement towards the door, then seemed to think better of it, and stood still. Wharton looked sharply at her; her breath was coming quickly, and the two spots of colour on her cheeks burned brighter than ever.

Cause and effect often seem to a bystander to be rather disproportionate. Edward Dadley, as he entered the room, certainly did not strike Wharton as a very agitating individual. He was a tall well-made man, of about eight-and-twenty, to judge by his looks. Even in his evening clothes there was a faint and distant suggestion of the stable about him, and his trousers undoubtedly were rather unnecessarily tight. A fresh complexion, bluish gray eyes, a fair moustache, and features calling for no particular comment—a kindly, trustworthy, unimaginative young gentleman, with a profound knowledge of horses and dogs, and sport in all its branches; —with a disposition, probably, to hold art, and books, and music in slight contempt, and to undervalue the more cultivated side of life generally: but still honest and loyal-hearted, and acknowledged universally in his own set to be a "thoroughly good fellow."

He came forward towards Elizabeth with a frank cheery smile.

"It's very kind of you to ask me to come and see you in this sort of way, Mrs. Lorimer," he said, shaking hands with her. "I was awfully sorry to miss you yesterday."

"I wished very much to see you again," answered Elizabeth.

Wharton stood watching her. He fancied there was something constrained and unnatural in her manner. She was generally so composed, and almost stately, in her bearing, that her present restlessness struck him all the more forcibly.

"I am going abroad to-morrow, so that I could not leave the matter to chance. I thought you would forgive my short and informal invitation."

Elizabeth said this prettily, looking up at the tall young man before her. Wharton did not enjoy the situation in the least.

"I was only too delighted to come, I'm sure," said Mr. Dadley very cordially.

Then he looked rather hard at Wharton. He seemed to expect the latter to speak to him.

Whether from nervousness or from some subtle feeling of the incongruity of the position, Elizabeth could not make up her mind to introduce the two men to each other. There was an awkward pause. Dadley was the first to speak. His voice was rather loud and noisy. Wharton noted the fact; he was disposed to be observant of all this man's short comings.

"You always seem to be going abroad, Mrs. Lorimer," he said. "I called here about—well, let's see—last September two years I believe it was, just before I went to America. You know I've been to America?" he added, with an air of simple importance which edified Wharton considerably.

"No," she said, "I didn't know it."

"Yes," Dadley went on, "I have though, Mrs. Lorimer. I had a very jolly time. A lot of sport. Everybody goes to the Rocky Mountains to shoot now, you know. It's quite the right thing. You've been, I suppose?" he added, turning suddenly, with an inquiring glance, to Wharton.

"No," he answered quite slowly, fixing his eyes

meanwhile on Mr. Dadley's boots. "I don't shoot; and I always avoid doing the right thing on principle. It's a little—shall we say—unimaginative to do the right thing."

Wharton looked up at Elizabeth as he said the last few words. There was something of surprise and disappointment in her expression; and she did not seem to hear what he was saying.

Mr. Dadley stared at the last speaker for a minute with an air of slight bewilderment. Then he seemed to conclude that Wharton had intended to be amusing, and laughed a little, in a civil perfunctory manner.

"But I was going to tell you, Mrs. Lorimer," he said, turning again to Elizabeth, "that when I called here before, you were abroad then. And they said something about illness, and I felt awfully sorry. I hope you weren't ill, Mrs. Lorimer?"

The colour died out of Elizabeth's cheeks.

"No, no," she said quickly. "It was not I that was ill."

"I'm uncommonly glad of that," remarked Mr. Dadley.

He really looked quite relieved: but he continued to turn questioning glances upon Fred Wharton. The young squire seemed to find something singularly perplexing in the aspect of Elizabeth's other guest.

Wharton felt nettled by this inspection. This man, he supposed, was some old friend of Mrs. Lorimer's; possibly a distant cousin;—perhaps they had played together when they both wore

short frocks and pinafores—that thought was not wholly palatable to him.—But they were far enough apart now any way, and the man, whoever he was, had no right to presume upon his old acquaintance with Mrs. Lorimer. His knowing her when she wore pinafores—if he had done so—by no means justified his staring, in that unmitigated sort of fashion, at her present friends.

Wharton moved away and sat down in an armchair by the fireplace—the same in which Elizabeth had sat when Mr. Leeper expended all the powers of his eloquence in trying to convert her to the Cause and into Mrs. Leeper. Wharton felt far from amiable ; two are company and three are none. He had a very distinct feeling that he was the third just now. He began idly rearranging some tall white narcissus blossoms, that stood in a glass jar on a little table at his side. The flowers were very sweet. Elizabeth had filled all the vases and pots with them; and the air of the rooms was heavy and faint with their perfume. If he must needs be third, Wharton was determined at least to appear unconscious of representing that generally unwelcome member. But as he leaned back in the armchair, and, with half-closed eyes, watched his fair hostess and the tall young squire, his irritation grew stronger and stronger. Wharton was generally very respectful and tender towards all living things. The sight of a flower lying, fading in the hot dust of the street, among scraps of paper and rubbish, caused him actual pain. This evening he was possessed with a curiously vindictive feeling ; and, as he noted

every word and motion of the white-robed Elizabeth and that objectionable young man, he pulled one or two narcissus blossoms to pieces, in the most wanton and hard-hearted fashion.

Elizabeth had moved across the room, and seated herself rather wearily in a chair on the other side of the fireplace, nearly opposite to Wharton. Edward Dadley having discovered a solid and somewhat elevated seat, drew it up beside her and sat down too, giving the legs of his trousers a little hitch up just above the knee as he did so, and asking a number of questions regarding Claybrooke at the same time.

"That's an awfully nice old house of your uncle's, Mrs. Lorimer," he said. "I was wonderfully fond of Claybrooke, you know. I wanted my father not to sell that little place of poor Aunt Maria's, but he would do it. He's a capital fellow in his way—my father," added Mr. Dadley meditatively; "but I always have thought him awfully pig-headed."

Elizabeth smiled faintly.

"Yes, he is frightfully pig-headed," Dadley went on, with an air of strong conviction. "If he wants you to do a thing, he never leaves you alone till it's done. Isn't there something about a man bearing a yoke in his youth? Upon my word, Mrs. Lorimer, that's just what I've had to do. I've never had my own way yet about anything."

Edward Dadley leant a little towards Elizabeth, and looked full at her as he said this. Then he suddenly seemed to remember Wharton's presence again, and cast a sharp glance towards him.

Wharton happened to raise his eyes at the moment, and they met Mr. Dadley's. He felt singularly disagreeable. He gave an insolent little yawn and said slowly—

"I daresay it has been very good for you."

"It hasn't been pleasant any way," answered Dadley shortly, and turned to Elizabeth again.

"Have any of those Harbage girls married yet, Mrs. Lorimer?" he went on. "Poor old Harbage! I used to feel awfully sorry for him, you know. He really was a very good old sort: but Mrs. Harbage was an awful woman. It used to make me perfectly sick to see the way she crammed those wretched girls down every man's throat; and poor old Harbage used to get so hot and miserable, and yet he always did exactly what she told him. That woman was a caution, you know."

Elizabeth smiled again.

"Everything goes on just the same down there," she said. "People never seem to change at all in Midlandshire."

"I wonder if the waggonette with the canary-coloured body and wheels is going still," said Dadley, laughing. "It was the finest thing out to see poor old Harbage driving that waggonette, with Mrs. Harbage and all the little Harbages inside. Then do you remember that dance at the Adnitts' at Lowcote," he continued, throwing himself back in his chair, sticking his long legs straight out in front of him, and tucking his fingers into his trousers' pockets. 'What a nice dance that was. I don't believe I've ever enjoyed a ball so much since."

Edward Dadley paused and sighed, as if the memories of that ball were really almost too much for him.

Elizabeth was evidently trying to bestow all her attention upon her guest. She looked tired and pale: but she managed to keep up a certain show of interest in Mr. Dadley's numerous reminiscences.

Wharton, glancing across at her from his arm-chair, felt more irritable than ever. The conversation seemed to him in very poor taste. The young squire's vocabulary was lamentably small. Wharton thought him rather a coarse-grained person. It was unendurable to suppose that he should be in any way connected with Mrs. Lorimer's past life. Wharton pulled the head, quite savagely, off a narcissus flower, as if that was to blame in some mysterious way for his present annoyances.

"Do you remember," said Dadley again, turning towards Elizabeth:—"Do you remember, Mrs. Lorimer, the squire took a little too much of his own champagne at supper, and just as we were all going away, he seized on poor dear old Aunt Maria and dragged her out into the middle of the room, and said we'd have another Sir Roger? 'Pon my word, you know, I don't believe I ever laughed so much in my life. Poor Aunt Maria was in the most awful state. Ah! that was a good ball. Do you remember"—Wharton began to loathe that phrase—"Charlie Melvin wanted you to give him a second valse, and you'd promised—all——"

Mr. Dadley checked himself suddenly, and cleared his throat, with a rather unsuccessful attempt at in-

difference, while he looked quickly across at Wharton again. It seemed to strike him suddenly that he might be going a little too far.

Wharton had given over pulling the unfortunate flowers to pieces, and had picked up a book. He was not reading; he was watching his companions quietly; and wondering whether it would not be much wiser and more dignified just to get up and go. He was evidently not wanted; his position was a little ridiculous; and yet there was something about Elizabeth's appearance which made him very anxious to stay. There was a strangely blank look on her face which he could not understand. If she had merely looked bored, he would have thought it natural enough under the circumstances: but she looked something more than bored. Wharton had a conviction that a good deal was going on around him that he could not fathom at present. Then, Mrs. Lorimer was going away to-morrow. He put his dignity in his pocket, and decided to remain.

"I've never been back to Claybrooke since," said Mr. Dadley, leaning towards Elizabeth slightly as he spoke. "I've not seen any of the people for years. But sometimes I think, do you know, Mrs. Lorimer, that I never enjoyed any time in my life so much as those two winters."

Elizabeth's face flushed slightly. She tried to smile: but the attempt was not a very successful one.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Dadley got up, and stood with his hands behind him and his back to the mantelpiece—giving a

little kick with each foot to settle his trousers down into their proper place over his knees. He cleared his throat again and looked at Wharton.

"London's uncommonly full for the time of year," he remarked.

"Oh—er—were you speaking to me?" asked Fred Wharton, putting up his eyebrows slightly and shutting his book. "Perhaps London is full," he added. "I really don't know. It's not a subject I have very carefully considered."

Edward Dadley contemplated the toes of his shoes for a moment:—it is remarkable how much inspiration a certain class of men seem to derive from the contemplation of their shoes. Then he looked at Elizabeth for a minute, rather regretfully. He was not an observant person: but he was aware that he and his companions were at sixes and sevens. He was an honest-hearted fellow; he believed that there was a mistake somewhere; he feared that he was putting his hostess in a false position. He gave a little sigh, and then said—

"Well, I'm going to settle down at last, Mrs. Lorimer. You're such an old friend that I should like you just to wish me good luck, and all that sort of thing, you know."

He paused.

"I'm going to be married; I'm going to marry my cousin. She's a good little girl; and——" again Dadley paused. "I'm sure," he went on, with a sort of rush, "if you should be coming up north any time, and would look us up, I'm sure I—I mean she, my cousin, you know—bother it—my wife and I should

be only too happy to see you, and," he added, looking towards Wharton, with a civil smile, "your husband——"

Elizabeth started up; she gave a low cry, as if in actual pain.

"Husband?" she cried. "My husband? what do you mean?"

Edward Dadley stared at her in utter amazement. He made a motion towards Wharton.

"Why, Mr. Lorimer," he said.

Wharton had started up too, with a smothered exclamation of a somewhat violent order. Could anything be much more disastrous, he thought, than to be taken for the dead husband of the woman you had more than half a mind to propose to? He would have spoken: but he was absolutely dominated by the strength and power of Elizabeth's emotion.

She stood there, looking like some beautiful wild creature, which, hopeless of escape, turns, with an agony of despair and entreaty in its eyes, upon its pursuers.

"Ah!" she cried again passionately. "My husband? You don't know what you have said. You don't know what you have done. And yet I ought to thank you, for you have shown me what I really am. My husband?" she stretched out both hands and then let them fall despairingly at her sides. "Ah! God help me!" she said.

There was a depth of sorrow in the tones of her voice and in her gesture, which filled both men with pity. But Wharton, even in the midst of his pity was sensible of the artistic beauty of her appearance.

"What an effect on the stage," he thought. Dadley was simply and utterly distressed.

"God bless my soul," he said distractedly, "what have I done?"

Elizabeth could not control her voice sufficiently to answer. She looked at Wharton for a moment, and then turned away.

"Hush, hush!" said Wharton; "haven't you heard? —don't you know?"

He glanced at Elizabeth. He had a horrible feeling that he was going to wound or maim her in some way: but there was no alternative.

"Mr. Lorimer died," he said very quietly and clearly, "two years ago, in the south of France."

"God bless my soul!" said Edward Dadley again. "Nobody had told me. I didn't know it."

The tears came into his eyes. He felt he would have given five years off his life—which was certainly generous, for men of Edward Dadley's type distinctly prefer this world to the next—to have left those unfortunate words unsaid. His old love for Elizabeth had stirred very strongly within him this evening. He was bound in honour to the "good little girl" up in the North: but he told himself sadly that Mrs. Lorimer was the handsomest and most attractive woman he had ever known; and he cursed the ill-luck which had prevented his hearing that she was free, till now, when he himself was bound.

CHAPTER X.

"I fain would follow love, if that could be;
I needs must follow death, who calls for me."

THERE is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, and it is really a very great relief to take that step sometimes. So, at least, Fred Wharton felt, when, at this awkward and uncomfortable period of the evening, Mrs. Frank Lorimer rustled into the room. He had been anathematising her pretty freely in private during the last month or six weeks: but on this particular occasion he was disposed to hail her advent as that of a veritable angel of deliverance.

Mrs. Frank was in a state of the most refreshing self-complacency. She was wearing for the first time a new and very elaborate gown that had arrived from Paris the week before. She felt wonderfully urbane, and equal to almost any emergency. Her dress had a very long train to it, which, when she walked into the room and stopped suddenly in front of her hostess, caused her husband—who was following her closely—no small inconvenience. He had to perform a series of rather undignified little gymnastics in the background to avoid falling over, or otherwise damaging, the wilderness of lace and flounces which barred his onward path.

"My dear Elizabeth, how fearfully ill you look!" exclaimed Mrs. Frank.

She glanced curiously at Wharton and Dadley as she spoke. She had not counted on finding three persons all looking embarrassed and agitated. Two she would not have minded finding in some such condition, but three seemed to her altogether one too many.

"What have you been doing?" she asked.

There was an imploring expression on Elizabeth's face which made her stop. Fanny Lorimer had plenty of tact when she chose to use it.

"I suppose it's that white gown which makes you so pale. You must pardon my saying so, Elizabeth, but you know white is trying if one's tired. And I daresay you're dreadfully tired with all that wretched packing.—I'm so glad to see you again," she added, turning with a charming little air of innocent pleasure to Wharton. "We were beginning to be quite nervous about you. I wanted to apply to one of these offices, don't you know, which are advertised in the daily papers, where they find missing friends for you, and all that sort of thing. I hope you settled your business comfortably before you left Sussex? We all felt so interested in it though we hadn't the ghost of a notion what it was."

"You are too kind, Mrs. Lorimer," said Wharton, bowing.

The angel of deliverance carried a small sword apparently—still, sword or no sword, she was welcome.

Frank had been too busy avoiding his wife's train

to take in any general impression of the situation on first entering the room. He saw that there was a stranger present; it seemed to him that both Elizabeth and Wharton were silent and constrained. Everybody looked rather odd and confused, he thought; but it really was no particular business of his. Frank contented himself with stroking his fair beard and wondering mildly whether anything could be the matter.

Elizabeth introduced Edward Dadley to her sister-in-law, and Mrs. Frank embarked immediately in a lively conversation. Mr. Dadley's powers in that line were never very great, and at this moment he was not a little disturbed, and was consequently even below his average in conversational ability. But Mrs. Frank was so serenely self-satisfied, owing to her Paris gown, that she would, I believe, have been capable of carrying on a deeply interesting conversation with a hydrocephalous idiot if necessary.

Seeing that Dadley was safely provided for, Elizabeth moved across the room to speak to Frank, who was engaged in welcoming Wharton back to civilised life again, and in making inquiries about Adolphus Carr and his charming house in Sussex. As Elizabeth came up Wharton turned away. He could not quite recover his ease of manner in her presence, after the very false position in which Edward Dadley's unfortunate mistake had placed him.

"Mr. Wharton," said Elizabeth softly, without looking at him, "will you do me a kindness?—will you go and play? It would be a relief, for I am too tired to talk."

There was something graceful in this appeal which touched Wharton. It meant, he thought, that she wished him to understand that she attached no blame to him for the distressing scene that had just taken place.

"Yes," he answered, quickly turning to her. He was shocked by the pallor and sadness of her face.

Wharton went away into the back drawing-room and, settling himself at the piano, began playing rather tumultuously the first thing that came into his head.

"I am afraid I can't talk, Frank," said Elizabeth, sitting down wearily by him. "I suppose I'm overtired. My head aches distractingly."

Frank looked down at her kindly. Her appearance pained him. He wished he could take care of her and do her some little service in a quiet brotherly way.

"You're simply tired out," he said. "I don't half like your going off all alone to-morrow without any of us."

Elizabeth smiled faintly.

"I shall be better alone, I think," she answered.

There was a long silence between them. While Wharton went on playing,—slipping from one thing into another with pleasant readiness and ease;—and while Mrs. Frank discoursed to Dadley, who became more and more filled with the conviction that he was in the presence of "an awfully clever woman,"—Elizabeth sat staring straight in front of her, with her hands lying clasped in her lap. She felt dazed and stricken. The world had come to an end, after all,—all she wanted now was to keep her-

self steady and calm till they had gone away, and she was left to herself. Wharton, playing on almost mechanically, wandered at last into the accompaniment of the song of love, and death, and parting, which Elizabeth had said he must sing to her earlier in the evening. He remembered himself immediately and changed the motive: but the air had struck Elizabeth at once. She recalled the words only too clearly. She tried hard to master herself. With a sort of desperate gasp she put up one hand and pushed the soft brown hair back from her forehead.

Frank noticed the movement. He did not know what was the matter with her: but he grew a little frightened. He thought she was going to cry, and of all things he hated to see a woman crying.

"We'd much better go and leave you quiet," he said. "You are regularly knocked up; and you'll have to go off by the seven o'clock express, I suppose, to-morrow."

"If you go, please take them with you," said Elizabeth, with a motion of her hand towards Dadley and Wharton.

Wharton was not so absorbed in his music but that he managed to see pretty clearly what was going forward in the other room. He saw Frank get up and go and speak to his wife, who turned to Elizabeth and talked to her with a good deal of vivacity for a minute or two,—apparently she was offering a lot of good advice regarding the next day's journey. Then the two women kissed each other with a pretty show of affection. Edward

Dadley shook hands with Elizabeth and said something,—Wharton could not quite hear what, but he thought he recognised the word "awfully." Evidently they were all going away. Wharton played on, he hardly knew why.

When Frank had bidden Elizabeth good-bye he came over to the piano, and laid his hand on Wharton's shoulder.

"We're going, my dear fellow," he said, "and you must come too. She is quite knocked up, and I want her to be quiet."

Wharton got up with a hopeless feeling upon him. It was a wretched ending to a wretched evening. Everything had gone against him. He had had no chance.

He went up to Elizabeth.

"I suppose I must go too, Mrs. Lorimer?" he said.

Elizabeth held out her hand to him. There was a blank look on her face. She tried to smile, but the smile died away again and she did not speak.

Wharton went out of the room feeling just a little mad; he ran downstairs after Frank, and began putting on his coat with a considerable absence of his accustomed composure; he wanted to get out of the house and be quit of it all.

"I knew Mrs. Lorimer years ago down at Claybrooke," Edward Dadley was saying to Mrs. Frank, while he helped her, with more gallantry than handiness, to wrap herself in her fur cloak.

"Ah yes," she answered.

"She isn't a bit altered," added Dadley.

For some reason or other this observation infuriated Wharton. It made him feel wild. It seemed as if Elizabeth Lorimer was being claimed by this man.

Martha had just opened the door, and two cabs were waiting outside in the dimly-lighted street. The night was cold and chilly, with a drizzling rain.

Wharton came to a sudden desperate determination. He began taking off his overcoat again.

"I've forgotten something I must say to Mrs. Lorimer," he said, turning to Frank. "Don't wait for me. I'll follow you in five minutes."

"Oh, my dear fellow, don't go back now," answered Frank Lorimer quickly. "Do let her be quiet. She's tired to death."

"I won't be long," Wharton said again. "I must just speak five words to her."

Frank would have protested further, but his wife, who had watched this little scene with lively feelings of interest, called out to him rather impatiently :—

"For pity's sake, make haste, Frank. You and Mr. Wharton will have plenty of other opportunities for conversation. Pray don't keep me meditating for ever on this wet doorstep !"

Edward Dadley laughed his company laugh. He fancied Mr. Frank Lorimer must get the worst of it sometimes.

Very reluctantly Frank followed his wife, best gown and all, out to the cab. The front door banged, the two cabs rattled away in different

directions, and then Wharton made his way upstairs again. He had a feeling that his conduct was a little peculiar, that some people might, not unjustly, accuse him of a want of delicate feeling in going back thus after having bid his hostess good-bye: but Wharton had got to a point where he cared very little what anybody might say or think; he only knew that there was an absolute necessity upon him to see Elizabeth Lorimer again.

The door of the back drawing-room was standing half open on to the landing. Wharton waited a moment to steady himself. He was about to take the most important step he had ever taken in his life, and his old habit of looking calmly at the situation reasserted itself.

The house was very quiet. As he paused in the doorway he became aware of a low sound in the air,—a sound not very often heard in luxurious rooms amid warmth and beauty and the sweet scent of flowers, but a common enough sound, alas! for all that. Wharton associated it with dusky forms crouched down on doorsteps at night, half-seen by the passers-by in the dingy gaslight; or sad tattered figures, loitering aimlessly at street corners in the bleak mist and fog of dull gray evenings. It was only the sound of a woman sobbing; and that not loudly—sobbing quietly, as though hope was dead and her own heart nearly broken.

Wharton waited a minute or two hoping that the sobbing would cease, but it did not do so. The sound became terrible,—a perfect nightmare,—to him. He could bear it no longer. He felt he

ought to go away, and yet the desire to see Elizabeth once more grew stronger and stronger. He pushed the door wide open and went into the room.

Wharton had listened to the sound which arrested his attention as he paused in the doorway with considerable emotion: but it had hardly prepared him for the scene within.

Elizabeth had sunk down on to the floor, near the big arm-chair in which Wharton had sat so quietly nursing his resentment against the obnoxious young squire earlier in the evening. She was in a half-kneeling half-sitting position. She had thrown her bare arms out, with a passionate gesture, across the little black wooden table at her side. Her face was pressed down upon her two hands. The vase of narcissus flowers was overturned, and the pure white blossoms were scattered on the carpet.

Wharton's first instinct was to retire. He could hardly bring himself to look at the usually quiet stately Elizabeth as she lay there shaken with the storm of her grief. He had an idea that, except on the stage, a woman's emotions should be as carefully veiled as her form. It seemed to him almost sacrilegious to permit himself to see her now, when she had thrown aside all conventional restraint, and was laying bare her inmost heart in the wild abandon of her sorrow. Wharton had always cultivated a general spirit of benevolence, but he had had very little experience in the active art of consolation. So bewildered was he by the situation in which he found himself that he hardly knew how to act. It seemed inhuman to go away and leave

her thus. He could not do it. Yet if he stayed he was in honour bound to let her know at once that he was in the room.

"Mrs. Lorimer," he said gently. "Mrs. Lorimer."

The pains of birth are cruel, even more cruel perhaps than those of death. With bitter pangs and burning tears a new and nobler life was being born within Elizabeth. She had seen her old lover again, and his own words had, in a strangely vivid way, recalled the image of her husband. For a moment the two men had seemed to stand side by side. Elizabeth had compared them and judged them, and then turned away sick at heart. All her past had risen up before her. The but half-hearted courtship and marriage; her own sense of bewilderment amid the new conditions of her life; the haunting thoughts of the boy-lover whom she had cared for with innocent girlish fondness; her husband's illness and death; her rebellion against God and against sorrow; her angry disdain of simple duty; her determination to over-live her trouble; her restless desire for amusement, and her not wholly successful attempt at friendship,—all these things came to her remembrance and overwhelmed her.

She lay, in a very agony of contrition, with her face pressed down upon her hands,—in which she clutched the wooden rosary,—when Wharton's voice suddenly aroused her.

Elizabeth struggled up on to her feet. As she did so Wharton saw that her face was all marred and disfigured with crying. The flowers she wore were crushed and broken. They had made a great,

dull, red stain upon the bosom of her white dress. There was something very hideous to Wharton in that stain. He could not take his eyes off it or forget it.

With a violent effort, Elizabeth controlled her sobs and turned upon him haughtily.

"Why are you here?" she said. "Why have you come back in this way, without any warning?"

Wharton admired the fine courage with which she tried to protect herself in her extremity. He felt at a dreadful disadvantage.

"Forgive me," he answered. "I could not help myself. I was obliged to come back. I have something I must say to you, and this is my only chance since you are going away to-morrow."

"You must leave me," said Elizabeth harshly, without looking at him. "I want to be alone."

But Wharton felt he had gone too far to turn back now.

"It is impossible for me to leave you in this condition," he said quietly. "As your friend, Mrs. Lorimer, I have a right to stay till you are calmer."

"It will do no good," Elizabeth answered bitterly. "You cannot help me; nobody can help me. I must bear my trouble alone. People don't die of grief, they say—or of repentance either, for that matter," she added.

"Still I shall stay," said Wharton.

A look of dead indifference settled down on Elizabeth's face. If he would stay, he must. After the first flash of womanly anger had died away, she did not really care very much whether he stayed or not.

She was so absorbed in her own emotions that she was almost unconscious of the presence of another person. There was no trace of the coquette about Elizabeth. She did not pose: she simply felt.

She sat down in the arm-chair. Wharton stood waiting. For some time there was silence between them. At last he said:—

"Mrs. Lorimer, this is dreadful. You must tell me what has happened."

"I cannot tell you," she answered, speaking slowly and with some difficulty. "I cannot tell any one."

Then she added, after a minute or two:—"I have had a terrible experience to-night. Can you fancy what it is suddenly, in a moment, to be filled utterly with self-reproach? To have built yourself a fair dwelling-house, and in the time of your utmost need to find that it is built on the sand? To see it crack and crumble around you, to see it washed away for ever, while you stand homeless and desolate? Oh, Robert, Robert!" she cried, breaking suddenly into a wild passion of grief. "Oh, my darling, forgive me! I have tried to forget you. I have wanted to fling all the past behind me. I have wanted so desperately to be happy. You, who have entered into that perfect peace where all our miserable selfish desires and jealousies fade away, forgive me, pardon me!"

Elizabeth stood up. The flood-gates were open, and, utterly regardless of Wharton's presence, she poured forth her heart in speech.

"To-night," she went on, "I have learnt the

truth. Too late I have seen my fatal mistake. I have looked back at my past life; I see that I have missed the meaning of it all, and that self, self, nothing but self, is written across every page of it. I might have found fulness of joy in wedded love; bitter-sweet joy in mourning; calm and chastened joy in duty and obedience. I have rejected it all. Ah! believe me," she said, turning suddenly to him, "God is merciful. He forgives. Soiled and weary, but repentant, we may still creep into heaven at last. But He is terribly just. What we sow, that, and that only, can we reap. I have sowed to myself, and I reap the fruit of my sowing—sorrow, emptiness, a fearful sense of waste. Yet I cannot complain. It is bitter—no one else can ever know how bitter: but it is all my own doing, and it is only just."

To Wharton there was something almost sublime in this submission. He thought of Our Lady of Sorrow again; and could have kneeled down and worshipped the woman who stood before him, crowned with the glory and the anguish of her utter self-abasement.

After a little time she looked up again. All the hardness had melted out of her face, and there was something very wistful and tender in its expression.

"If I had only lived two or three hundred years ago," she said, "I should have gone away now and buried my mistakes and repentance in some convent. I should have put on coarse garments; have brought my body into subjection with fasting and penance; have hardened my hands with labour, and——"

"Don't," cried Wharton suddenly, with a shudder. "Pray don't, Mrs. Lorimer: I can't stand this."

Elizabeth smiled faintly, but her lips were tremulous.

"Why not?" she asked gently. "I think, do you know, I could be very peaceful and contented in some quiet place, where high walls shut out the world, and where I might tend poor, old, sick folk and teach little children. But this is a mere fanciful dream, touched with self-love again—I can't do this."

"No, thank God, you can't," he said under his breath.

"I must do something, in a way, far harder than this," she went on. "Something quite commonplace and comfortable. I must go back to Claybrooke to-morrow, and try to please and comfort those whom, in my selfish pride, I thrust aside and scorned.—I have made a great failure.—Now I shall be content with very simple duties.—I shall be humble in future I think, and quite willing to take the lowest room. There are better things in life than happiness perhaps.—But it is sad," she added, looking away, and speaking more to herself than to him, "it is all very sad. It is all over for me;—and the long years stretch out so gray and level into the distance;—and I shall be all alone;—and I am so young."

The last few words moved Wharton strangely. She was very young; and the mystery and tragedy of it all seemed to him infinite. As he looked at her in her piteous beauty and sorrow, Wharton read

his own heart clear.—Friendship seemed to him a very pale and intangible good; his philosophies took to themselves wings and flew away; all his doubts and indecisions resolved themselves into one passionate desire. His face grew thin and eager, and a great light came into his eyes. He forgot everything else. He only knew that, amid warmth, and light, and the penetrating sweetness of flowers, he was standing alone, face to face, with the woman he loved.

Wharton threw back his head and took a long deep breath. It seemed to him he had never really lived till now.

Elizabeth was struck with the change in his appearance; it almost frightened her. Instinctively she moved a step back.

"Elizabeth, listen to me," he said, bending towards her; "listen—I love you. I know that I love you. Look, dearest, I know I am not worth very much. I have been a light-minded frivolous creature enough all my days. But I will love and honour you; I will serve you early and late; your lightest wish shall be my law. I will be your very slave. I believe I could make you very happy, Elizabeth —only love me, darling," he said, "love me!"

The young man's eager face, the words of passionate tenderness and worship, were very wonderful coming to Elizabeth at this moment. She had sunk very low in her own estimation, all her pride was humbled in the dust—and now suddenly, unexpectedly, came this offer of love and protection.

"Ah!" she said, "how can I love you? I dare not love you after all the past."

"We will forget all the past," he answered. "We will both begin life anew from to-night. The future is ours—only love me, Elizabeth."

Do not despise poor Elizabeth if she hesitated. She had taken but a few steps along the rugged way of penitence and self-denial that leads up—as we trust,—at last, to the perfected glory and peace of heaven. Saints and martyrs have paused and turned pale at sight of that hard stony road winding up the bare hillside. What wonder if this delicate, weak, and erring woman should cast longing backward glances at the green pastures and still waters in the valley below? What wonder if gentle companionship, if love, and beauty, and common human joys, should tempt her?—if more tender hopes even than these—hopes which like every true woman she had cherished, and which it had been her lot to see wither and die—should move her to give way? Tiny baby-hands seemed for a moment to press about her bosom, and sweet baby-lips to meet her own in clinging kisses.

With eyes dim with strange half-happy tears, with a smile dawning again on her pale and weary face, she stood looking at her waiting lover.

Wharton thought he read her answer.

"Elizabeth!" he said, in a tone of triumphant joy, and stretched out both his hands with an impetuous gesture to take hers.

As he did so the wooden rosary slipped from her yielding fingers and fell with a hard dry rattle on to the floor.

Wharton and Elizabeth started apart.

In moments of vivid excitement and deep emotion a very small incident may change the course of feeling, and consequently of events. That time-honoured symbol of prayer, and penitence, and humility, with its roughly-carved image of the dying Saviour of mankind, seemed suddenly to interpose an invisible, but impenetrable barrier between the two lovers.

Elizabeth was the first to speak. Her voice sounded thin and far off, as though it came from a great distance.

"I cannot marry you," she said; "I belong to my dead husband."

"A living love is better than a dead love!" cried Wharton fiercely.

"The greatest love must die to gain that which it loves," she answered, pointing to the crucifix lying among the scattered flowers.

"Elizabeth," said Wharton desperately, "you dare not be so cruel. Through my love for you I have found a new life. Have you given me a soul merely to damn it?"

Elizabeth covered her face with her hands. The temptation to yield to his pleading was almost irresistible. It is so difficult in the face of that which is seen to cling to that which, though unseen, is yet eternal. But Elizabeth had, at last, perceived that through the wilderness of this life there stretches a "more excellent way;" and she dared not wander from it in search of mere temporal happiness.

When she spoke again she was quite still and calm.

"You must go," she said. "God is good; He will guide us both. I cannot marry you."

The last appeal of the civilised man, like the first appeal of the savage, is, after all, to the senses. As a drowning man clutches at straws, so Wharton clutched at his last chance. He came close to Elizabeth, and looked her full in the face.

"I will go," he said: "but first you must kiss me—only once, Elizabeth."

She flushed all rosy red: but she met his eyes steadily.

"You must go," she answered, "and I will not kiss you, even once."

Wharton turned away sick at heart,

His old, easy-going, pleasant life seemed shattered and broken, and at this moment he had little enough hope that a better life would rise from its ruins. The passion, which had so suddenly developed within him, left him bitter and unsatisfied. He was going through those dark and troubled waters which all the nobler natures among us must struggle through, at least once, if we are to learn anything real concerning our own hearts and the world around us. He knew that it was hopeless to try any more to move Elizabeth. He was weary of the battle and the anguish.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Lorimer," he said. "You have given me the greatest joys and the greatest sorrows of my life."

Elizabeth could not trust herself to answer. She merely gave him her hand. He took it and, bending down, kissed it lightly. Then he went slowly away.

Wharton looked back once. Elizabeth stood, a tall, glimmering, white figure among the fading narcissus flowers, with sad, wide-open, gray eyes, and a dull red stain upon her breast.

A few minutes later she had taken the little sketch of Robert Lorimer from its narrow resting-place in the writing-table drawer. Perhaps there is no purer joy in life, after all, than the joy of restitution.

CHAPTER XI.

"The true order of approaching to the things of love is to use the beauties of earth as steps along which to mount upward to that other beauty, rising from the love of one to the love of two, and from the love of two to the love of all fair forms, and from the love of fair forms to fair deeds, and from fair deeds to fair thoughts, till from fair thoughts he reaches on to the thought of the Uncreated loveliness, and at last knows what true beauty is."

THE next morning Elizabeth and Martha—the latter not a little bewildered by her mistress's sudden change of plans—travelled down to Slowby. It was a bright mild spring-day. The wind blew softly across the broad pastures, and the elm-buds blushed red in the sunshine. Here and there the blossom of the blackthorn still lay like a thin snow-wreath upon the hedges. The larch-trees had put on their dainty garment of green. In the spinnies the ground was starred with white anemone flowers, and the first primroses tempted the village children to wander far afield, between morning and afternoon school; while the cloud-shadows flitted lightly across the face of the country, and the lines of the distant woods looked infinitely far and still in the clear atmosphere.

Elizabeth had telegraphed to Mr. Mainwaring

early in the morning. She knew that telegrams were regarded with small favour at the Rectory, as one of the many superfluous and agitating developments of modern civilisation. Respectable and well-regulated persons should always know their plans beforehand; and only in cases of the direst necessity should they have recourse to this urgent, and rather undignified, method of communicating with their families. Mrs. Mainwaring held that it is always vulgar to appear in a hurry. But Elizabeth could not stop just now to consider the possible effects of her telegram upon her aunt's mind. She wanted desperately to get away from London at once. She dared not run the risk of meeting Wharton again, and she dreaded the thought of a catechism from Fanny Lorimer concerning her sudden change of plans.

She had grasped the idea of penance with all the energy of her ardent nature, and while the emotion was still strong within her she felt a feverish desire to break utterly with her past life, and to make her peace with her aunt and uncle. She was possessed with the passionate longing for entire self-surrender that has made torture and death an actual joy to thousands. She was in love with a new and exquisite ideal which had presented itself to her; and she could neither pause nor rest till she had made the offering of herself complete. This is a somewhat perilous state of feeling. It can meet the rack or the stake with a splendid courage: but it has a tendency to grow rather thin, and tired, and acid, when the crown of glory is not quickly awarded,

and when it is tested by the steady strain of every day.

Claybrooke Rectory has always struck me as a very composed place. It does not look as if its inhabitants would ever be the victims of overmuch spiritual exaltation. There is a suggestion of kindly and secure well-being about its warm sober colouring, solid masonry, quaint gables and windows, and about its well-kept lawns and gardens, which is certainly soothing and reassuring. Some places incline one instinctively to take comfortable views of this world and the next; and dispose one to wonder whether, after all, there is not a great deal to be said on the side of the Universalists.

Rufus, the old brown retriever, roused himself from a nap on the broad doorstep as Elizabeth got out of the carriage. He wagged his tail slowly, and smiled a lazy welcome to his former playmate: but he did not feel it necessary to express any more active joy at her return. Rufus had reached the time of life—common to dogs and men alike—when warmth is the greatest good, and cold the greatest evil, of existence; when no event is very surprising, and the mind is willing to acquiesce in any state of things short of actual physical distress.

The softly radiant spring-day, the stately calm of the house, and the old dog sleeping his easy life away on the sunny doorstep, formed a strange and pathetic contrast to the rapid movements, and worn eager face of the beautiful young woman, who passed hastily indoors.

The Rector was out, and Mrs. Mainwaring was

upstairs. They had not expected Mrs. Lorimer till the afternoon train—so said Bunton when he met Elizabeth in the hall. He was slightly put about, being unaccustomed to sudden arrivals, and to that reversal of preconceived ideas which they produce.

Elizabeth went swiftly upstairs, along the dark wainscoted landing, and opened the sitting-room door.

The scene within was very calm and sweetly cheerful. The room, with its white panelled walls and light curtains, seemed full of sunshine. One of the windows stood open, and a soft breeze—bearing delicate scents of the fresh-turned earth, of the springing grass and opening leaves,—came in at it, and gently stirred the lappets of Mrs. Mainwaring's white lace cap, as she sat quietly knitting by the fire.

There was something in this peaceful little picture which affected Elizabeth strongly. The imperative, almost hard, expression died out of her face, and gave place to a wistful tenderness.

Mrs. Mainwaring looked up as the door opened. Her forehead contracted slightly, and a pink flush came into her cheeks.

Elizabeth did not give her time either to rise or speak, but walked quickly across the room and knelt down on the hearth-rug before her.

"Aunt Susan," she said, and her voice took the tones of entreaty, while her eyes filled with tears, "I have been greatly to blame. I left you two years ago in the foolish pride of my heart: but I have been punished. Since then I have learnt a

hard lesson. I have come back to ask your forgiveness. I will be gentle and patient, I will try my utmost to please you,—I will be like your own daughter,—if you will only forgive me and let me come home."

Elizabeth's little speech ended in a sob.

All the hungry unsatisfied mother-love in Mrs. Mainwaring awoke and yearned towards the fair woman before her. She stayed neither to ask questions nor read a moral. She merely put out both her hands and drew the sweet weary head down to rest upon her bosom.

"My poor child," she said softly, "you are very welcome home. Perhaps we both have made mistakes in the past, but we will forget them. It must only be a question of love, not of forgiveness, between you and me."

"Ah!" said Elizabeth, with a restful sigh—like that of a little child, which, having lost its way and wandered far and wide, finds itself safe, at last, in its mother's arms again—"Ah! you do forgive me, dear Aunt Susie? I know I did wrong: but I am sorry, and I am so very very tired."

Mrs. Mainwaring stooped and kissed her forehead.

"Well then, darling, rest," she said.

It must be owned that the middles of things are always rather trying. Beginnings are full of hope and promise. We have been disappointed many times before, certainly: but, a fig for past disappointments!—this time all will surely go straight. End-

ings, though too often touched with dissatisfaction and regret, still have a promise of coming repose or change about them, which is generally more or less grateful. The morning and the evening are romantic, and one can think of a hundred and one pretty things to say concerning them: but it argues a very strenuous and active state of mind,—or a certain quality of wholesome dulness in one's composition,—if one can honestly sing the praises of the middle-day.

The morning of poor Elizabeth's repentance was strong and fresh. Nothing seemed too hard for her to dare, too difficult for her to undertake. But in healthy natures spiritual development is almost always gradual. There may be a moment of sudden awakening, when the head and heart alike are convinced of error; and the recognition of that error may produce a lasting effect on the character. But resignation and self-renunciation cannot be perfected in a moment. The perfecting of them is a long and arduous process, during which the poor soul, driven forth from its old dwelling-place and fainting in the arid wilderness, loses faith and courage at times, and cries out with hungry longing after the flesh-pots of its forsaken Egypt.

For a while the passionate feeling, born of love to her dead husband and bitter sorrow for her past wilfulness, supported Elizabeth. The breaking wave carried her far up the shore. But later, when the first intensity of her feeling had subsided, when mere emotion was required to crystallise into steady habit, there came a season of trial and danger,—a time of

what old devotional writers call "spiritual dryness," —in which she was tempted to think her faults of little importance, and her repentance exaggerated; and when the fair and stately ideal of the religious life grew pale and misty to her tired eyes.

She struggled bravely, for she had a noble spirit. She never quite lost her hold of the deep truths which she had grasped: but at times she was sad and restless, and the way seemed very long, and the burden very heavy. Victory is, too often, a melancholy business, after all. The battle may gallantly be fought and fairly won; yet afterwards there must be days of anguish for the wounded, and of mourning for the dead, and of heavy sorrow at sight of the trampled fields and ruined homesteads.

The promise is to those that "endure." And notwithstanding depression and self-distrust Elizabeth Lorimer did endure; and in time she was rewarded. She began, at last, to know the inward peace which springs from the absence of personal desire, and the serenity which grows out of true self-renunciation. In proportion as she ceased to love her own narrow life, she began to find a richer and wider life in sympathy with those around her. Acts of charity and of self-denial, which before had appeared to her only as tiresome obligations to her fellow-creatures, now became in a way sacramental, —symbols of faithful obedience to God and loving brotherhood with man. Elizabeth was learning, slowly and painfully, to exchange the love of her own fancies for the love of certain Eternal Verities, —doubted, scorned, pushed angrily aside by genera-

tion after generation; yet always abiding, patiently reasserting themselves, ever ready to be revealed in infinite sweetness and consolation to the broken and contrite heart.

It may seem slightly eccentric to describe the moral and spiritual experiences of a modern young lady,—who ministers to one's material wants at five o'clock tea, and does not disdain to make herself agreeable in ordinary society—in terms which are usually reserved for the delineation of a mediæval saint. But though the outward conditions and circumstances change, the vital processes of the human mind are very much alike in the first century and in the nineteenth. Given a certain type of character, its mental history will be nearly the same in every age.

It is certain, any way, that those who, like myself, had the privilege of seeing something of Mrs. Lorimer during the months that followed her return to Claybrooke, perceived a very distinct change in her.

Personally I must own to having been a good deal occupied about Mrs. Lorimer at this period; though I am afraid she was utterly indifferent to my sentimental condition,—if, indeed, she was even aware of its existence. She had lost some of her queenliness, some of the rich bloom of her early beauty: but, to me at least, she had never appeared more captivating. There was something in her face which reminded one of the still purity of the open sky, when the heavy storm-clouds are all rolled away and the evening light spreads itself, with a tender radi-

ance, over the resting land. There was a sweet reasonableness, and a certain gracious humility, about her. She was gentle and friendly, scorning no little deeds of kindly service to those around her.

The people of Claybrooke, who heretofore had regarded her merely as Mr. Mainwaring's heiress—as a young lady whose position and personal charms created a rather dramatic atmosphere about her, the observation of which might afford some innocent excitement to humbler individuals—now began to reckon upon her sure help and quick sympathy in all their troubles. Instinctively men of her own class treated her with the delicate courtesy and reverence which it should be the right of every woman to receive at the hands of every man: but which it is really a little difficult to accord to the alarmingly vigorous, lawn-tennis-playing damsels of the present day.

I do not doubt but that Mrs. Lorimer had sad hours, lonely hours, hours of disappointment and regret, that she was annoyed, and disheartened, and distressed, sometimes, like the rest of us. In comparing her to the saints, I am very far from wishing to imply that she was faultless;—indeed, I am disposed to think, that if the saints themselves had not made a good many mistakes, at times, while they were here on earth, there would be little enough temptation to ask their prayers now that they are safe in heaven. I would only say that I believe Elizabeth,—like her noble Thuringian namesake,—having once perceived the deepest meaning of this life, and having seen that "more excellent way," walked along it stead-

fastly, with a fine and simple courage, while the light about her shone clearer and clearer towards the perfect day.

If such things do not and cannot happen, if lives cannot be so lived, then indeed we are most miserable; for the fairest ideal of human attainment that has ever been vouchsafed to poor struggling men and women is, after all, but a delusion and a lie.

CHAPTER XII.

"Fear no more the heat o' the sun
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney sweepers, come to dust."

THAT summer was very wet,—it rained in June, and in July, and right on into September. At Claybrooke the stream, from which the parish takes its name, overflowed, and the low-lying lands in the valley were more or less under water for months.

There was a good deal of illness and fever about. The potatoes rotted in the ground, and the wheat grew in the shocks before it could be gathered in. In our heavy clay country a wet summer is a very nasty business.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Frank Lorimer, notwithstanding Elizabeth's defection, held stoutly to the plan of spending the summer in Switzerland. Frank protested on the score of expense and of the difficulty of taking two small children such a long journey: but, his wife having made up her mind, he, as usual, ended by giving way. So by the middle of August, the Frank Lorimers found themselves established in one of those charming little towns that fringe the

northern shores of the Lake of Geneva, with their rows of white houses.

Wharton had joined the party—he would really have been at a loss to state exactly why. His feelings towards Mrs Frank were certainly not of an ardently affectionate nature: but he liked her husband. Too he felt, deep down in his heart, a sort of morose satisfaction in being with Elizabeth Lorimer's relations, and in picking up stray bits of information about her from time to time.

A change had come over Wharton in the last few months. He was more silent and preoccupied, less cheery and expansive, and he looked a good deal older. He had been drawing hard lately; and intelligent critics thought they perceived a new quality in his work. It was less delicately pretty, but stronger, and with more meaning and directness of intention about it. One or two people were good enough to prophesy concerning him that he would still make his mark. When some acquaintance asked him, one day, how he had come suddenly to make such a distinct advance and improvement, he shrugged his shoulders and answered, with a laugh—

"Oh, you know, this child too has been in hell!"

The Frank Lorimers were very prosperous people. Things as a rule went easily and pleasantly with them: but just at this period they seemed to get a run of bad luck.

The weather was almost as wet in "the beautiful Pays de Vaud" as at home in England. A daily thunder-storm came to be reckoned as regularly included in the bill of fare. The children were poorly

and fretful; and, as a very crown of trouble, Frank managed, while doing a little rudimentary mountaineering, to slip on some loose rock and sprain his ankle. It caused him acute pain at the time, and obliged him to spend the best part of a month on the sofa, swearing mildly at foreign countries in general and at mountainous countries in particular; and declaring that he, for his part, should spend his next holiday at Margate, dine at one o'clock, and have shrimps every evening for tea, let Fanny say what she liked.

On a certain Monday afternoon, while the daily thunder-storm was cannonading backwards and forwards among the hills, the Lorimers were trying to amuse themselves, as well as they could, in their little *salon*. It was a not very luxurious apartment—possessed of solid furniture and a superfluity of faded red Utrecht velvet—on the second floor of the hotel: but it had the charm of possessing, also, two great French windows opening on to a balcony, which commanded a splendid view—when anything was to be seen.

Frank was lying on the sofa, grumbling gently. To come abroad at considerable expense, and then be laid up in this way, was enough to turn even his amiable nature a little sour. Mrs. Frank was struggling to take a vital interest in a Tauchnitz novel—concerning which she had a horrid suspicion that the third volume was lost,—and, alternately, listening to hear if the baby "sounded happy" with his nurse in the next room, and admonishing Nini, who, bored and irritable at being kept so much

indoors, seemed to be meditating unspeakable atrocities upon the now-no-longer-new "dollie with the pink hat." Fred Wharton stood lazily at the open window, with his hands in his pockets and his back to the company, watching the progress of the storm. He had developed rather a habit of standing moodily doing nothing but stare out of the window just lately.

The prospect was not a cheering one. Across the lake, the mountains of Savoy and of the Valais were sulking behind heavy streaming masses of white mist. Down towards Geneva there was a lurid light in the sky, and the swiftly-moving copper-coloured clouds were twisted and contorted into a thousand weird fantastic shapes. The broad lake, itself, was a murky blue, with long zigzagged flaws of livid gray, where the sudden gusts of wind swept across the angry surface of the water. In the foreground, Wharton could see the waves dashing themselves fitfully against the stone wall on the other side of the roadway; while great drops of rain splashed and pattered on the broad leaves of the pollarded plane-trees in the garden just below. It was not an encouraging outlook, certainly: but perhaps Wharton was none the less in sympathy with it on that account.

There was a knock at the door of the *salon*.

"*Entrez!*" cried Mrs. Frank over her shoulder.

Then, turning to the little girl on the floor by her side, she said:—

"Nini, my dear child, do have some sort of compassion on that unfortunate doll. You'll break its

head right off, you know, if you bang it down on the floor in that way."

Nini looked up, with a very mutinous little face, at her mother, and banged the doll's head down again on the bare *parquet* floor.

"I hate this dollie," she said petulantly, "she's so old. I want to go out into the garden and play."

Wharton turned round as the door opened. It was only a hurried and slightly distracted *garçon* with a packet of English letters.

"None for you, Fred," said Frank Lorimer, as he examined them slowly, before proceeding to open them.

Wharton turned back to the window again.

"Good gracious!" cried Frank all of a sudden.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked his wife. Almost any event would have been a relief to her this afternoon, she felt so unutterably bored.

"Elizabeth's ill, down at Claybrooke," said Frank slowly, running his eyes over the pages of the letter. "Old Mr. Mainwaring writes. They want me to go there at once."

Wharton set his teeth rather hard, as he watched the flaws of wind chasing each other across the sullen face of the lake. He remembered Elizabeth Lorimer as he had seen her last, standing, pale and patient, in her white dress among the scattered flowers. He had told her once that presentiments were silly things: but he thought, with a sickening feeling of dread, of the dull red stain upon her bosom.

"Fanny, come here!" cried Frank sharply. "Look here, this letter's a good week old. It was sent to

London, and evidently it wasn't forwarded for several days."

Fanny Lorimer moved quickly across the room, and kneeling down by her husband's side began reading the letter.

"Anything may have happened by this time," Frank said. "What on earth am I to do?"

"Oh! I'm afraid she is really very ill. I am afraid it is serious," said Fanny Lorimer in accents of genuine alarm and distress. "I tell you what, Frank," she went on, getting up and standing by him with a pretty air of determination, "I must go off to her at once, this very evening."

"Indeed you'll do nothing of the kind," he answered shortly.

Like a good many other people, Frank had a habit of getting remarkably cross when he was frightened.

"It's quite bad enough to have Elizabeth catching a nasty fever, going and poking about in beastly cottages, without your rushing off to look after her and catching it too. And I've not the least intention of being left here, tied by the leg, with a grumbling nurse and a couple of naughty children on my hands, I can tell you."

"I'm sure the children are not particularly naughty," answered Fanny Lorimer, who in the very article of death would have bristled up to defend the reputation of the two babies.

"I don't know what on earth to do, though," said Frank despairingly.

Fred Wharton had turned round and was standing with his back to the window. He had formed a

definite plan in his own mind, but he wanted to propose it quietly ; and make it appear the most natural and obvious course in the world, both to himself and to his companions.

He sauntered slowly up to the sofa.

"One thing is certain, any way, Frank," he said quietly, "you can't travel."

"I know," answered the other man dismally. "I hope I'm not a great coward, you know, but I really don't think I could."

"And Mrs. Lorimer can't be spared," added Wharton ; "that's clear."

Fanny Lorimer glanced up at him quickly. She held her own opinion as to what had made Elizabeth suddenly retire to Claybrooke, and Wharton become so silent and moody. Even at this moment of real trouble on her part,—for she was very fond of Elizabeth,—she could not resist trying to gain some hints regarding past events from his manner and expression.

Wharton looked at her steadily ; there was something rather hard and unpleasant in his face, which made Fanny Lorimer drop her eyes quickly on to the open letter again.

"If you write," he continued ; "it will be at least five or six days before you get any answer. If you telegraph you can't explain all your reasons for not coming, and they may not unreasonably think you rather indifferent and unsympathetic." He paused a minute. "I really think you'd better let me go," he added. "I can catch the evening train through to Paris. You know I could go right on down to Claybrooke and telegraph you the real state of the case."

"You really are the best fellow in the world, Fred," said Frank Lorimer, his face clearing up considerably. "I shall be everlastingly grateful to you."

Whatever Fanny Lorimer's feelings may have been, she hid them under a charming smile of relief and gratitude, and made no objection.

All that night, and through the next day, as he travelled north—in noisy trains, on the steamboat, and at crowded stations—Fred Wharton was haunted with a vision of Elizabeth Lorimer, in her white gown, with the rough rosary in her hands and the red stain upon her bosom. He had a lurking terror of what he might hear at the end of his journey; and, at the same time, a wild hope that somehow he should see her and plead with her, and that, this time, she would yield to his pleading. He knew, only too well, that he loved her desperately, and he hoped on still against hope.

Tired, haggard, and dirty, he arrived at quiet little Slowby early on the second day after leaving Switzerland. Hiring a cab, he drove straight over to Claybrooke by the broad, high-lying, main road. The rain was falling in a steady downpour, and all the distant country was blotted out with impenetrable mist. When at length he got to Claybrooke, Wharton left his cab in the village street and walked alone up to the house.

He could almost have cried out loud in the intensity of his suspense, as he stood waiting on the doorstep. When the butler opened the door Wharton glanced at him sharply. There was something odd, he fancied, about the man's bearing and manner.

"Tell me," he said hoarsely, "how is Mrs. Lorimer?"

Bunton stared at him for a moment; he seemed hardly to know how to answer.

"Don't you know, sir?" he asked slowly. "Haven't you heard?"

"No, no," cried Wharton impatiently. "Why, if I had heard, I shouldn't come here now to ask."

Bunton waited a minute or two before speaking. He looked back into the great sombre hall behind him, and out across the carriage-sweep, as though he hoped that from somewhere somebody would come and help him.

At last he said simply—

"The funeral was yesterday at noon, sir."

Wharton threw up his two hands and staggered back against the doorpost.

"Good God!" he said under his breath, "she is dead."

It was all over. He would never plead with her and she would never yield to his entreaties. The great black curtain had been drawn between them for ever, and he would never see her lovely face in this world again.

Far away inside the house a door banged. Then Wharton heard footsteps in the garden, and a tall man with straight clear-cut features and deep-set, keen, gray eyes, in a long white mackintosh, gaiters and shooting boots, came slowly round the corner of the rambling old house. Wharton knew directly that it must be Mr. Mainwaring, from the subtle likeness he bore to Elizabeth.

But Mr. Mainwaring had aged very much since the afternoon that he rode home, in the chill and dusk, from his long day's hunting, seven months before. There were deep lines about his mouth, as though he had suffered some heavy sorrow which had eaten into his very heart. He walked with his head a little forward and his shoulders somewhat bent. Leaping about him were the two fox-terriers Billy and Boxer. Evidently they had only just been let out, and were in a state of frantic joy.

"Get down, dogs, get down!" said Mr. Mainwaring testily. "Can't you be quiet for once in your lives, you senseless brutes?"

Looking up, he caught sight of Wharton in the doorway.

"Who's that?" he said sharply. "What's the matter? Is the man ill?"

At any other time Wharton would probably have resented this somewhat uncourteous address pretty strongly: but now he was too broken down to care to stand upon his dignity.

"I have just heard some news from your servant here," he said, "which has shocked me inexpressibly."

Mr. Mainwaring paused and looked at him. Wharton's personal appearance was, naturally, not improved by his long and hurried journey: but Mr. Mainwaring saw that, whatever his business might be, he was undoubtedly a gentleman.

"I come from Frank Lorimer," said Wharton.

"He ought to have come himself, long ago," answered Mr. Mainwaring harshly.

"They are abroad," said Wharton. "Your letter only reached them the day before yesterday. Lorimer has had an accident; he is laid up, and it was impossible for him to travel.—I knew Mrs. Lorimer very well," he added, looking Mr. Mainwaring full in the face. "I offered to come here and telegraph the latest news to them, but——"

Wharton's voice grew husky; he could not manage to say any more.

Mr. Mainwaring turned away, and gazed down the carriage-drive, through the dull rain and mist.

"You are too late, sir," he said.

"I know it," Wharton answered, quietly enough: but he felt that Mr. Mainwaring's words cut right into his very heart.

All along he knew he had been just that:—"too late." It made him nearly mad to think it was possible—nay, even probable,—that everything would have ended so differently, but for his own selfish and cowardly indecision;—if he had spoken, as he had been greatly tempted to, when he met Elizabeth in the windy twilight, that evening on the Embankment. His misfortune, he feared, was pretty much of his own making. He had no one to blame for it, after all, except himself; and that reflection added just the bitterest drop to the cup of his sorrow. A sort of blind rage took possession of him at the thought of all he had lost. He turned suddenly and fiercely upon Mr. Mainwaring, regardless of the strangeness of their relative position.

"But how did it happen?" he demanded. "Why was she ill? What—what have you all been doing?"

The two men were still standing on the broad doorstep. Mr. Mainwaring had, so far, made no proposal to Wharton to come indoors. Mr. Mainwaring was not in the habit of analysing his own sensations very acutely: but he was sensible that there was a certain dreary harmony between his present state of mind and the dull soaking day. And then, too, he felt unwilling to take this stranger into the house, still hushed and, in a way, sanctified by the recent presence of death. Mr. Mainwaring found this interview anything but pleasant. He desired to cut it as short as possible, and he thought it would be easier to do so standing out there in the wet. When Wharton's urgent reproachful questions sounded in his ears, he turned to the young man swiftly and proudly. It seemed to him almost insolent, and he felt disposed to make a harsh rejoinder and cut the interview very short indeed: but there was something in the expression of Wharton's face that arrested his attention.

Mr. Mainwaring looked at him keenly for a minute or two, while his grisled eyebrows contracted, and a straight line cut itself, deep and sharp, into his forehead. At last he answered quite calmly—

"You tell me you knew my niece well," he said: —"very well then, you must know that she was not easy to turn from any purpose she took in hand. She was a noble woman; she was stubborn and determined in carrying through that which she believed to be right."

Wharton bowed. He felt that he had spoken intemperately, and that his companion's courtesy exceeded his deserts.

"My niece," Mr. Mainwaring went on slowly and doggedly, as though compelling himself to speak—"was not one of those dainty persons who are content to let their religion walk in silver slippers; who plume themselves on being very much distressed by suffering, while they do nothing practical to lessen it. My niece Elizabeth's virtues were not of the sentimental and hysterical order."

Mr. Mainwaring paused a moment, looked away, and then spoke again, with the same quiet determination.

"We've had a very bad season," he said. "There has been fever here, off and on, all the summer, from the floods and the wet. My wife and I wanted her—wanted Elizabeth—to go away, and get out of it all. But she wouldn't. She wouldn't leave us and the people. She chose to stay and work.—She comforted those who were in trouble and nursed the sick with her own hands. It was not a very pleasant office," he added: "but she went through with it all; and behaved like the gracious, and fearless, and godly woman that she was."

Mr. Mainwaring drew himself up, and looked at Wharton with a somewhat bitter smile.

"Verily she had her reward," he went on. "She pulled a lot of cases through by sheer pluck and patience. She was loved and honoured by all. And then, one day, she got a cold, or a chill, or something, and she sickened herself, and——"

Mr. Mainwaring's voice broke suddenly.

"Now you know all I have to tell you," he added, after a minute or two.

Wharton had nothing to answer. He stood look-

ing on the ground, lost in a maze of strange and painful reflections. With Elizabeth, he felt, it must be well, for she had fulfilled her highest ideal;—and that, not aided by romantic and sympathetic surroundings, in an atmosphere charged with the spirit of sacred devotion: but hardly, in the plain commonplace life of a dull little Midlandshire village. A clay soil, a wet summer, a bad harvest, very ordinary, stolid, labouring men and women ill with fever, a certain determination to go her own way—call it foolhardy or heroic, as you please—with a background of solid comfort, secure prosperity, calm respectability;—these were the curiously unexciting conditions of Elizabeth Lorimer's martyrdom.

Thinking of the sweetness of her youthful grace and beauty, and of her fate, Wharton was filled with awe and bewilderment. For a time his own personal sorrow was swallowed up in wonder. He could not understand it.

Suddenly he turned again to Mr. Mainwaring, who had been watching him in silence.

"What does it all mean?" he asked, with a fierce desperation.

Mr. Mainwaring gave himself a sort of shake.

"Ah, young man, who shall answer you that question?" he said. "Not I; nor men far wiser than I am."

Mr. Mainwaring was not in the habit of jumping at conclusions; he was too stately a person for that: but as he stood watching his companion he had arrived at a pretty distinct perception of the situation. He came a step nearer, and laid his hand quietly on Fred Wharton's shoulder.

"You loved my niece," he said in a low voice.

"Ah God! how I did love her!" cried Wharton passionately, stung into vivid consciousness of the magnitude of his own misery and desolation again.

"Poor boy! poor boy!" said Mr. Mainwaring gently.

His face was full of compassion; yet he could have found it in his heart to envy the younger man the wild energy of his sorrow.

Mr. Mainwaring's grief was of a very different complexion. It did not strive or cry, it was patient and dry-eyed: but he knew that it would rise early and late take rest; that it would make him eat the bread of affliction and drink the waters of bitterness, through all the coming days and years, till his body should be laid, there, in the quiet country churchyard; and till his soul too should have found its rest, at last, in the blessed calm of "the land that is very far off."

"In losing her I have lost everything," said Wharton in a despairing voice.

"No, no," answered Mr. Mainwaring, quickly and almost sternly; "you have not lost everything. Your faith is left you as a Christian; your honour is left you as a gentleman; your work of some sort is left you too, I suppose;—or if you have no work it is easy enough to find some,—there's plenty waiting to be done on every side. You're very hard hit just now: but remember you're not alone. Sad things happen every day; worse things than have happened to you. Yes, worse things even than death, and than knowing you will never hold the woman you love in your arms." He paused, and then went on kindly

—"After all, you know, time is on your side. You are young yet, and all the best of your life may still be before you. A man at your age gets over a blow like this with a few ugly scars; while a man of my age just bleeds quietly to death."

Mr. Mainwaring smiled a little as he said the last few words, and stuck out his under lip.

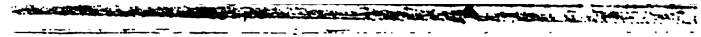
Wharton stood fairly awed before the strength which could smile thus stoically at its own suffering. It seemed to pull him together somehow, and give him courage to face the world again.

"Thank you," he said simply.

The wind—which had risen considerably in the course of the last hour, and promised to clear the sky of clouds by mid-day,—rushed through the swaying tree-tops, dashed the drops from the glistening laurels on either side the carriage-drive, and cried and called plaintively round the gables of the old sandstone house. There was a little space of silence between the two men who, each in his own way, had so truly loved one woman. Then Mr. Mainwaring raised his hat, and standing there, uncovered, in the driving rain, said very calmly and reverently—

"Ah, my dear little Lizzie! God rest her sweet soul!"

THE END.



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